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On Graduate Unions and Corporatization

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The existence of graduate labor unions is seen as evidence of the changed and changing nature of academic economies over the past two decades. To be exact they are seen as a result of academic capitalism and broad trends towards corporatization (Bousquet, 2008; Lafer, 2003; Rhoads & Rhoades, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) whereby institutions of higher education increasingly engage in market-like behaviors and display “the culture, practices, policies, and workforce strategies more appropriate to corporations” (Steck, 2003, p. 66). This involves adopting “corporate models, cutting costs and seeking profit-making opportunities” resulting in heavy reliance on private funding for research and expanded commercial influence over academic pursuits (Clay, 2008, p. 11) Within the context of changing academic economies and corporate universities scholars see graduate employee unions as a potential source of resistance and progressive change (Bousquet, 2008; Lafer, 2003; Rhoads & Rhoades, 2005).

It is probably not a coincidence that the limited empirical research available notes that the vast majority of graduate workers or graduate assistants (GAs) willing to take on the tedious, time consuming work of union organizing are from the humanities and social sciences (Rhoads & Rhoades 2005). It is within these disciplines that the reliance on graduate labor and time to degrees has risen the most dramatically and opportunities for tenure track employment upon graduation have dropped at a similar pace. These are the same disciplines on the short end of diminishing institutional monies that are disproportionately allocated to potentially profitable or productive departments and academic units (Bousquet 2008; Rhoads & Rhoades 2005).

The concentration of unionists in particular fields highlights differing fates of various fields of study. Ironically, according to Rhoads and Rhoades (2005) this also illustrates the functions of particular academic disciplines. The social sciences’ and humanities’ purpose, in part, is to develop criticism and commentary on relevant social institutions, practices, and politics. Consequently, corporatization has created the conditions its challenges emerge from. This contradiction of academic capitalism leads Rhoads and Rhoades to view the presence of GA labor unions on campuses as simultaneously indicating that corporatization is underway and offering the potential for resisting its consequences.

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Bousquet (2008) sees graduate labor unions in conjunction with adjunct instructor unions as offering the best chance of turning the tide of corporatization due to the numbers of GAs and contingent faculty working on campuses; collectively their influence can be overwhelming. Furthermore, Bousquet sees graduate and adjunct unions as the only current source of energy, movement, critique and theory available. Perhaps this is an exaggeration, but he rules out hope that other groups, namely tenure-stream faculty unions, will contribute to stymieing corporatization because they are beneficiaries of a sharply tiered labor forces and often cooperate with management in creating and maintaining them.

Lafer (2003) agrees with Bousquet that GA labor unions offer the best source of resistance to corporatization. But Lafer sees this potential rooted in the power of example. Graduate labor unions, in his eyes, have the potential to spark organizing drives among faculty and other employees, and they offer a working model. Unionization would be the best form of opposition to corporatization according to Lafer because organized labor alone offers the capability of counterbalancing current trends. Although no spike in faculty organizing efforts has been observed, Lafer contends that recent practices—salary freezes, transfers of intellectual property rights, limits on academic freedom and the erosion of tenure protections…—have created an environment in which unionizing is a more seductive prospect.

Based on in-depth interviews and ethnographic participatory-observations within the University of Florida’s chapter of Graduate Assistants United (UFGAU), the unionists share the general critique of corporate universities that the mentioned scholars offer. They want no part of it, but they do not see themselves as the counter force that can turn back these dubious trends. Their views on unionization fall closest in line with Joan Acker’s (2006) notion of an inequality regime. The basic idea is that organizational relations of all sorts are the products of interlocking practices that reproduce them in spite of concerted change efforts. In fact, the change efforts contribute to the institutional organization they consciously seek to alter. In other words, resistance is constitutive of that which it is resisting. Graduate labor organizers talk about the union contributing to corporatization in four ways: creating an image inconsistent with notions of higher education, reallocating responsibilities of ensuring fair compensation, moderating disruptive policies and politics, and by entrenching wage inequality. Although they do not see graduate unionization as a counter force, they do see it as a necessary means for influencing labor practices and campus politics within the corporatized regime.

**Contributions to Corporatization**

Although they share the criticisms and general rejection of corporatization that Rhoads and Rhoades (2005) document, the union activists here do not see their work as holding the same capacity for stemming the tides of businesslike practices. As Rhoads and Rhoades point out, participants’ indictments tend to echo the rhetoric and reasoning of their academic disciplines,
overwhelmingly the social sciences and humanities with one participant from the fine arts. They utilize the same disciplinary perspectives when asked to evaluate the potential for graduate unions. Through critical reflection they see some unstated ramifications of their work that end up contributing to the trends of corporatization. One crucial element is that the presence of labor unions helps create an image that more closely corresponds to common conceptualizations of a factory than to a community of scholars. The presence of their opposition to labor practices casts them as employees, and there are different criteria for evaluating how employers relate to employees than educators to pupils.

GJ: Really if you bottle down to it, the union does sort of obliquely contribute to corporatization in the university if you get back to sort of the model of how unions originally worked… when I think about how do unions began, they began in factories where we have workers that are being not paid enough or being, or having to work in dangerous conditions because corporate employers are concerned about their bottom lines, right. So, now you have corporate universities who are concerned about their bottom lines. And so, us having to organize those workers, I think sort of obliquely contributes to the administration’s own perceived idea that university is a corporate thing. For better or worse … I don’t think that members of GAU think about it that way. I mean I don’t think that [administrators] think of the university as a corporation and us as corporate workers or factory workers or whatever… it’s sort of a self perpetuating cycle where if we unionized and administration can act more like a corporation. I’d like to think that’s not actually how it’s playing out.

Collective bargaining also effectively relieves administrators of their responsibilities to compensate fairly and places the burden on the union’s shoulders.

Nedda: The fact that our contract requires letters of appointments, those letters stipulate the, not only you know the obligation of the department to the graduate assistants but the responsibility of the graduate worker and what they have to do to fulfill the end of the bargains and so that kind of contact protects the interests of both parties… the letters of appointments also legally protect the faculty from individual mitigation and sets clear standards that everyone could follow, and it also means that because the union is negotiating on behalf of all graduate assistants the department has less of a responsibility to try to improve the pay in there and like improve the conditions of their individual graduates assistants like for example when I was at the University of Oklahoma where we didn’t have a union, we actually, in [my] department, we actually got a thousand dollar raise one year because our faculty fought really hard for it…so that’s one way that, one, one responsibility that is removed from the shoulders of the individual faculty departments I guess.

Because graduate unions are almost universally opposed by university management (Ehrenberg, Klaff, Kezsbom, & Nagowski, 2004) they are able to save money on pay and
benefits for graduate employees while deflecting criticism for it towards the graduate union. Although Article 23.5 of the negotiated contract clearly states that “Nothing Contained herein shall prevent the units from providing salary increases beyond the increases specified above” (UFBOT & UF-GAU, 2009). Over the span of time covered by this research (2005-2010) union organizers had to publicly counter claims by two different provosts about the union contract prohibiting raises beyond what is guaranteed in their agreement. Nedda’s quote above also expresses a tacit recognition of previous research’s findings: collective bargaining improves faculty student relationships- because it results in well defined work expectations and a recognized, formal procedure for redressing grievances- as well as the quality of graduate scholarship (Julius & Gumport, 2002; Lee, Oseguera, Kim, Fann, Davis, & Rhoads, 2004).

Others talk about the union’s presence as beneficial to undergraduate education also. The benefits are linked to the restrictions placed on administrators. The union is seen as a moderating influence that does not turn back academic capitalism, but it does keep it manageable so that it does not expand too rapidly. The union is sort of like the restrictor plates on racecars that keep them from flying off the track.

Bilbo: Yes, I think it makes us more appealing place I think we make the conditions better and they attract better graduate students because of it. I think the education will look better probably. For all they complain about it, it’s probably better that we don’t teach gigantic classes, probably makes it better for the undergraduates… because you know at Florida State their solution was simply to like double the size of classes GAs taught. They can’t do that here and the result is smaller classes. All the research I know of says smaller classes are better. It’s good because it works well with the administration in other ways. For example they talked to [Nedda] and asked people to show up for the ombudsman search. It’s for them to kind of get feedback before they really shoot themselves in the foot. If they propose something and we say “no, that’s crazy and insane” sometimes they back off from that… If there was no Union they wouldn’t do something like that and it might just blow up in their faces and they won’t be ready for that. We’re sort of like the canary in the coal mine for them in some ways. That’s what happened at South Florida when they proposed changing graduate enrolment from 9 to 12 hours and people flipped out. They have a union, but it’s a ghost chapter, so there was nobody to talk about that before it happened.

The role of graduate unions described by Bilbo is a phenomenon that can be seen within organized labor more broadly since the passage of the NLRA. Unions have been incorporated into the system, so they are no longer true counter forces; they are coalescing forces. Ultimately, unions have a vested stake in the company’s success (Adams & Brock, 1986).
Bilbo: Any union, in the end, is going to want the company to… be successful…Because if the company is unsuccessful there will also be cuts. That means there won’t be more benefits. In that sense by definition every [union] does that.

Beyond serving as a moderating force on the corporate regime, activists also see their union moderating the most radically inclined graduate workers, thereby alleviating some tensions. As mentioned part of what unions provide are institutionalized (controlled) processes for enacting change. Because the consequences for acting outside of those channels can result in a loss of contractual rights, actions and tactics that might otherwise be employed such as strikes are off of the table.

Dusty: There was a word that said, it said solidarity and I never had heard the word solidarity before but like I really like the word, it like feels really cool to me. So I went and looked it up and looked at more history… and I was like, my God, all the radical politics that I love came out of the labor movement, that’s what I want to do. But I started even more to the left than that though... When I first started really trying to get people organized… I was trying to get people organized for the IMF protest that was going to be going on … I just felt like it could be something really exciting where you’re questioning authority, like that’s what I loved about it and, and a lot of those people there were like, they were also involved in a labor movement.

Deeb: One of the things [it seems] you are talking about [is] the [grad] union counterbalancing that kind of resistance [or political action].

Dusty: Yeah.

In spite of these perceived effects and ramifications the fact that these organizers do not abandon their union indicates that they see it as a net plus or that the more militant opposition would not affect any greater change. This could be a result of the sobering effects of being close to power. After all it is cliché that the dramatic rhetoric utilized by insurgent political campaigns does not match the policies they pursue once in a position of influence.

The last way in which graduate union organizers see their work as enabling corporatization is through wage disparities. According to Bousquet (2008) one feature of the corporate academy is a sharply tiered wage structure. The fact that tenure-stream faculty benefit from this on top of other institutional hierarchies is what leads him to write off faculty unions as a source of change; it stands to reason they would support such arrangements. This is an issue UFGAU has taken on. Activists recognize their role, yet cannot escape it. The GA union’s contributions to this stratification are a bit less Machiavellian though.

General Membership Meeting March 2009: We discussed wage inequality tonight. We proposed various ways to close the wage gap. The idea that got the most traction was an across the board, whole dollar raise as opposed to a percentage because that [MEANING
THE LATTER?] gives the wealthiest the lion’s share of the benefits. Typically those are
not the people that are most active in the union.

In the end the negotiations mentioned above resulted in a percentage raise. The whole
dollar raise, or even onetime bonus, was a nonstarter, and when push came to shove a raise is a
raise. Given the low wages at the bottom of the ladder, the staggering cost of living increases
since the last time graduate employees had received a pay increase, and the fact that it is
politically useful to get credit for bolstering people’s salaries, negotiators could not reject the
offer when the alternative was the status quo\(^2\). Even if the investment of resources was skewed
towards the hases GAU could take credit for getting GAs raises.

To be fair, in the absence of organized labor, there would be nothing to push administrators
to invest at all in the disciplines deemed irrelevant when policy is driven by bottom line
concerns. In that case the expenditures on behalf of the university would likely be more skewed
towards the profitable disciplines. But this further highlights how graduate unions can serve to
moderate and legitimate administrative practices along the path of corporatization. Having labor
unions defending (and owning) pay structures as they do in order to get political credit is helpful
to administrators even though more extreme measures could be taken unilaterally.

**Discussion**

In no way should these observations be taken to mean that graduate union organizers see
their work or unionization as futile or undesirable. What is more corporatization takes place in
the absence of unions, so this should not elicit proposals to defeat it by eliminating graduate
workers’ bargaining rights. Universally the activists interviewed expressed a view of graduate
unions as valuable and necessary.

We must keep in mind that the specific findings, such as entrenching wage inequality, from
a single study case cannot be generalized broadly. These particulars do however highlight the
relational foundations of institutional structures as, Acker’s (2006) concept of the inequality
regime hinges on, and how they are- or could be- appropriated to serve administrative interests.
They should also compel activists towards critical reflection and suggest avenues for tactical
adjustments within the graduate labor movement. Given this and other research demonstrating
that the cost of organized graduate labor to universities is minimal (Ehrenberg, Klaff, Kezsbom,
& Nagowski, 2004) and often leads to better work relation among faculty and GAs (Julius &
Gumport, 2002; Lee, Oseguera, Kim, Fann, Davis, & Rhoads, 2004) the near universal
opposition to unionization by administrators is puzzling, even from a management perspective. It
suggests hostility is more of an ideological reflex than a calculated stance.

\(^2\) It is important to note that in the state of Florida, the university board of trustees is the “legislative body” that
imposes a contract if an agreement cannot be reached with the labor unions on campus (The 2010 Florida Statutes:
XXXI 447.403, 2010; The 2010 Florida Stautes: XXXI 447.203, 2010).
References


