

“I Prep Longer, Worry More, and Don’t Talk about Potentially Controversial Topics in My Field”: The Impact of Student Complaints on Faculty Work

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Abstract

This research examines the faculty experience of student complaints about their courses and instruction and the impact on faculty work. Using a mixed method approach of a survey and interviews of faculty on a large, public university campus, we evaluated the impact of complaints or the fear of such complaints on instructional practices, and examined differences based on faculty gender, race, and rank. We found that the impact of student complaints on faculty work included faculty becoming more cautious and conscientious, reducing rigor, self-censoring, and feeling demoralized. Faculty confidence in the administrative response to student complaints was also explored. Our findings indicate that the experience of student complaints, coupled with the administrative response to them, is a sign of the deprofessionalization of the faculty.

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In recent years there has been considerable media attention on troubling classroom interactions between faculty and students. Some examples include: “Viral Video Gives ‘Distorted’ Picture of Pro-Police Class Confrontation, California Professor’s Defenders Say” (Sforza); “A Blackface ‘Othello’ Shocks, and a Professor Steps Back From Class” (Schuessler); “At N.Y.U., Students Were Failing Organic Chemistry. Who Was to Blame?” (Saul) “Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis Signs Bill Permitting College Students to Record Professors in Class” (Betz) and “A Lecturer Showed a Painting of the Prophet Muhammad. She Lost Her Job” (Patel).

By contrast, our literature review reveals that higher education scholarship and commentary about troubling classroom interactions focuses on professional practices of classroom management, the effect of bias on student evaluations of teaching (SETs), and issues such as diversity and inclusion in the classroom, student-consumer orientations, the role of academic freedom in teaching, faculty review and tenure, and institutional accountability. Only rarely, however, does any of this material touch on the experience of faculty members as they carry out their responsibilities related to the instructional process.

To fill this gap, our study focuses on faculty responses to student complaints or the fear of student complaints about pedagogy and course content. We examine how student complaints are situated in the aforementioned larger conversations. Moreover, we consider how complaints shape the classroom as a workplace and influence the pedagogical choices of faculty members.

Literature Review

While there is a developed body of literature on student complaints made on the end-term student evaluations of teaching, there is not the same kind of robust examination of the impact of student complaints on faculty work. Rather, the impact of student complaints is often situated in explorations of topics other than academic labor. The academic literature most directly related to student complaints about their instructors appears in studies on student incivility. This work examines a range of conduct, including expressions of dissatisfaction with the instructor’s course, course policies and assigned grades as well as intimidation and challenge behaviors (Bantha et al.; Boice; Burke; Feldmann; Fitch et al.; Goodboy and Myers; Holdcroft; Knepp; Morrisette; Weimer). Laverghetta suggested that student incivility may result from a consumer mentality that encourages students to view faculty as service providers and gives students license to expect their needs will be satisfied. Similarly, Chowning and Campbell found that students with a greater sense of academic entitlement are more likely to complain to professors or engage in email or face-to-face conversations that are demanding, overly informal, and/or presumptuous. Cox et al. observed that students with consumer orientations proved more

prone to lie about faculty on end-of-term student evaluations of teaching (SETs).

Some evidence indicated that women faculty, faculty of color, younger faculty, and those with less experience and/or credentials reported more incidents of incivility and bullying from students (Alexander-Snow; Burke et al.; Johnson-Bailey; Keashly and Neuman; Knepp; Lampman). This evidence corresponded with studies that point out the potential for bias based on gender, race, and age in SETs (Esaray and Valdes; Hoorens et al.; Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman; Murray et al.; Reid; Wallace et al.; Zipser et al.). Other research, however, pointed not to greater incidents of student incivility for women faculty but instead to significantly more negative outcomes of student incivility for women faculty members (Lampman et al.; Lampman et al.). Similar findings appeared in studies on both the emotional and job advancement consequences of SETs for women faculty and faculty of color (Carmack and LeFebvre; Cox et al.; Elkins and Hinkle; Gelber; Lilienfeld; Ray et al.; Roseboro) as well as in more general work on the relationships between students and faculty (Tormey; Webber).

In terms of the faculty work experience, several studies do examine the impact of classroom issues on faculty dissatisfaction (see, for instance, Baker et al.; Reybold). Heffernan and Gates connected negative workplace emotions for faculty with greater degrees of perceived student academic entitlement as well as with expectations that instructors become more oriented to serving students as customers. Similarly, Edgar et al. determined that faculty felt pressured to respond to student demands associated with entitled behaviors (i.e., fast response to emails, grade inflation to ensure good SETs). More recently, Redstone and Villasenor discussed how a student's ability to use social media to broadcast any disagreement can create a more fraught classroom environment and could result in faculty self-censorship. Finally, Santoro helpfully contrasted two forms of faculty dissatisfaction, namely burnout and demoralization, with the former characterized by being exhausted and overwhelmed and the latter being more about an inability to embody the values that drew a faculty member to the profession.

Another approach to the issue of the impact of student complaints on faculty work is rooted in a framework that emphasizes the purpose of the university itself, specifically the nexus of the pursuit of truth, academic freedom, and free speech (Alger and Piper; Dutt-Ballerstadt and Bhattacharya; Fish; Furedi; Hutchison; Lackey; Lukianoff and Haidt; Rauch; Reichman; Reichman). This approach underscores the necessity for faculty to engage in their teaching and research without fear of sanction or retaliation, including finding ways to balance intellectual and social abrasion with civility and determining when to self-censor and why (Chamlee-Wright). If these norms represent an ideal academic environment, a series of explorations of both faculty and student self-censorship demonstrated how classrooms in the current political and

educational climate fall short of these standards (Chamlee-Wright; Cohen; LaNoue; Larson et al.; Mercer; Redstone and Villasenor; Tubbs; Whittington; Wood).

In addition, the influence of an external political climate on faculty teaching and research, as well as faculty fear of reputational damage from politically-motivated allegations, is hardly new (Hamilton; Lazarsfeld and Theilends; Schrecker). At present, there is increasing recognition that both campus initiatives like bias response teams (LaNoue) as well as numerous and more pervasive forms of media (Redstone and Villasenor) can generate negative attention and thus provide distinct challenges for faculty and university administrators, including curtailing traditional rights for faculty and students. Kwestel and Milano, for example, found that university social media policies (SMPs) value university reputation and brand management over academic freedom (see also Cooper and Marx). Nonetheless, LaRoche indicated that environments that lack clear guidelines, particularly about extramural statements, raised concern among faculty about whether their university would support them if controversy ensues. Other work focused on students. DuMont and Hutchens, for example, examined the balance of students' rights to free speech and the responsibility of the university to monitor online learning environments as well as issues such as harassment.

Finally, there are a number of first-person and journalistic accounts of faculty members' experiences with student complaints about instruction in addition to an extensive array of practical pieces geared toward faculty, department chairs, or other administrators. These articles focus on strategies for preventing or responding to student complaints when they arise (Buller; Gambescia and Donnelly; Gedye et al.; Goldstein; Heator) as well as longer thought pieces designed to prompt consideration with focus on a specific case or cases (Gerson; Pettit).

This body of literature, however, lacks empirical scholarship about faculty experiences of student complaints. There is a need to understand how student complaints impact the ways in which faculty members do their work and how they feel about their work. This effort must include faculty members' experiences of the institution's responses to student complaints, particularly in an era of deprofessionalization in which administrators are facing pressure to satisfy students and prevent reputational damage to the institution (Gerber).

Study Objectives and Methods

In order to meet the primary study objectives and align them with our review of the literature, we designed a mixed methods approach using both a survey and follow-up interviews with volunteer respondents. The study was determined to be exempt from review by the IRB Administration. The survey instrument was developed for the purposes of this study and was piloted in order to check for clarity and online functionality. Survey responses yielded quantitative data on the experience of faculty members

with student complaints about pedagogy as well their general perceptions of, and any concerns regarding, such complaints. Survey responses also yielded comparative data (e.g., comparisons by gender, race, rank, and rigor). Follow-up interviews with a subset of 41 faculty members provided rich descriptions of faculty experiences with student complaints and how such complaints were handled.

The anonymous survey was sent to 1,370 members of the faculty at a regional state university with 20,000 students in April 2021. Five hundred ninety-six (596) faculty members completed the survey, resulting in a 43% response rate. The respondents made up a representative sample from each of the university's academic divisions and were generally representative of the university totals in terms of rank (42% tenured, 16% tenure-track, 42% non-tenure-track [NTT]) and underrepresented minorities (8%). Women were somewhat overrepresented (61% of survey participants vs. 53% of university faculty).

We intentionally left the definition of "complaint" open, except for excluding any comments received in end-of-course student evaluations of teaching. Thus, the first survey question posed:

To your knowledge, since joining the faculty at [this University], have any students made a complaint regarding your courses or your instruction? (Note we are asking about complaints students made **other than** in an end-of-course survey/formal student evaluation of teaching.)

This openness enabled us to understand and code the range of experiences that faculty reported as student complaints. Faculty who answered that they had experienced a complaint were then asked a series of questions to elaborate on a single complaint or, if they had experienced multiple complaints, to report on the most challenging one. Faculty who answered that they had not been the object of a student complaint were directed to the remaining survey questions.

In order to determine whether any observed differences in faculty responses were predicted by gender, race, and rank, we analyzed the data using the chi-square (χ^2) test of the statistical significance of group differences. We also used this method to examine differences across other variables such as different types of complaints, the seriousness of complaints, effects on teaching, and faculty confidence in the administrative response to student complaints. Finally, we employed this test for comparisons of faculty who were teaching controversial subject matter (including content that might make students uncomfortable or content that might be considered political in nature) or teaching a course that would be considered academically rigorous with faculty who were not teaching those types of courses.

Results

Quantitative Data

Of the 596 survey respondents, 231 (39%) reported being the object of a student complaint. Those faculty were asked to indicate the basis of the complaint(s) by choosing from a list of 10 statements (checking all that applied). Among the 231 complaints, 147 were classified as expectations-based (e.g., concerning a grade, enforcing a policy, course difficulty) and 66 were classified as expression-based (e.g., faculty statements, course materials/content). Twenty-eight complaints were reported to be based in both expectations and expression and in 46 cases, the basis of the reported complaint was something other than these factors (e.g., class format, claim that the faculty member was unresponsive to email, etc.). For respondents experiencing complaints, 82% said they were able to address the student's complaint effectively.

Several survey questions were designed to capture elements that could potentially point to the seriousness of the complaint. Twenty-five percent of complaint cases indicated that officials beyond the department chair were involved with the complaint in some way. In most of these instances, it was the college dean alone. Twenty-nine percent of the complaint cases involved one or more troubling behaviors on the part of the student; most frequently, it was the student misrepresenting the facts of the situation to others. In 18% of complaint cases, faculty believed their professional reputation was harmed as a result of the complaint experience. Finally, 7% of the reported cases led to some other specified consequences for the faculty member (e.g., professional development plan, letter of reprimand).

Most notably, nearly half (48%) of all faculty respondents said that knowledge of or worry over student complaints affects their teaching. Faculty members who responded "yes" to this question were asked to describe how it had impacted their teaching. These open-ended replies fell into four main categories which we coded as follows: (1) increased caution and conscientiousness (28%); (2) self-censorship (20%); (3) a reduction in rigor (20%); and (4) demoralization (19%). Some respondents experienced two or more of these effects, as in one faculty member's statement that "I prep longer, worry more, and don't talk about potentially controversial topics in my field." These responses also suggested that a greater proportion of women faculty members who were impacted by complaints reported low morale than men (26% vs. 15%).

Gender, Race, and Rank

In comparing faculty who had a student complaint and those who did not, women were not significantly more likely than men to report experiencing a single complaint or multiple complaints.¹ Likewise, for the factors potentially indicating more serious complaints, there were no significant differences between women and men for the involvement of other officials (beyond the department chair) in the complaint, troubling behaviors on the part of the student, or perceived reputational harm.² Gender did prove to

be a significant predictor of the likelihood of an expression-based complaint.³ In this case, men were more likely than women to have a complaint that was expression-based (37% and 25%, respectively).

By contrast, underrepresented minority faculty were more likely to report a complaint than majority faculty members (50% vs. 36%, respectively).⁴ As a result of the small numbers of cases of underrepresented minority faculty, meaningful tests of differences based on faculty race could not be conducted to see if race relates to factors such as troubling behaviors on the part of the student and the involvement of other officials beyond the chair.

With regard to rank (faculty status and nature of faculty appointment), those holding the rank of associate professor and professor were more likely to report having student complaints than those at the assistant professor rank and those in NTT positions (54%, 38%, 27% and 32%, respectively).⁵ We found no significant differences based on faculty rank for the factors indicating potentially more serious complaints (involvement of other officials or troubling behaviors on the part of the student).

Complaints Related to Controversy and Rigor

Two additional factors were considered in evaluating student complaints—whether the faculty member teaches potentially controversial subject matter (including sensitive content that might make students uncomfortable or content that might be considered political in nature) and academic rigor (i.e., whether the faculty teaches a particularly rigorous course or teaches with rigorous academic expectations). We found that teaching potentially controversial material did not predict student complaints.⁶ There was, however, a significant difference in the complaint rate associated with those who reported teaching particularly rigorous courses. In this case, faculty who reported that they teach a particularly rigorous course or impose particularly rigorous expectations were more likely to have had a student complaint in comparison with those teaching with less rigor (39% vs. 28%).⁷

Impacts on Teaching

Of the 48% of faculty who said that knowledge of or worry over student complaints affected their teaching, those faculty members who had experienced a complaint were more likely to report some impact on their work in the classroom (59% vs. 41% for those not experiencing complaints).⁸ Additionally, faculty who indicated that they taught potentially controversial content were significantly more likely to say that knowledge of or concern about student complaints had an impact on their pedagogy (57% vs. 39% for those not teaching controversial material).⁹ Being an underrepresented minority faculty was another factor predicting impact on teaching (64% vs. 46% for faculty who are not racial minorities),¹⁰ as was faculty rank.¹¹ Here, the majority of assistant and

associate professors reported that student complaint concerns had impacted their teaching (59% and 56%, respectively), in contrast to the majority of NTT faculty and faculty in the rank of professor, who indicated that student complaint concerns had *not* impacted their teaching (54% and 59%, respectively).

Uncertainty about the Administrative Response

When asked if the faculty member had confidence that the university administration would respond appropriately to a student complaint, half of responses (50%) indicated they were not sure. Faculty members in tenured and tenure-track ranks (professor, associate professor, and assistant professor ranks), however, expressed *no* confidence more often than confidence (39% vs. 14%, 44% vs. 7%; 24% vs. 15 %, respectively).¹² Among NTT faculty, however, the findings were reversed: 19% not confident vs. 33% confident in the administration.

Qualitative Data

Navigating Tensions Between Care and Complaint

Qualitative data also revealed that most faculty see handling student complaints as a routine part of the job and that they feel capable handling student complaints. Indeed, most faculty members expressed that they care about their students' learning and overall welfare, both of which they see as important aspects of their professional duties. As such, they indicated strong support for mechanisms allowing students to report unprofessional or illegal behaviors, as well as for having channels to handle more routine complaints. The following comments are representative: "Students should be aware of the proper channel of communication for complaints, starting with the instructor and going up the chain of authority"; "Student complaints should be taken seriously and investigated objectively"; and "I am glad we have a process for students' concerns to be heard."

For many faculty, student discomfort is an inevitable part of a productive learning environment and thus complaints should not be particularly surprising. In the words of one faculty member, "Perhaps great classrooms should be spaces where students and teachers feel safe to be a bit uncomfortable. As a teacher I suppose some student complaints are a healthy part of discomfort toward learning." This view of the classroom runs directly counter to that of other faculty members who spoke about creating a caring classroom environment as key to avoiding complaints. Among this group, some suggested that their own pedagogical approach prevents student complaints:

I have never in 10 years had any formal complaints from students. I feel this is thanks to the authentic and personal relationship I foster with them in my classroom and the efforts I put in to create a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment for learning to take place.

Likewise, another faculty member described: “I offer mid-semester [sic] check-ins/evaluations where I solicit feedback from students and try to make changes in my courses even during the semester to better meet their needs.”

These discussions reflect larger concerns about difficult-to-manage issues in pedagogy and, notably, frequently resulted in self-blame. One faculty member, who had been complained about by a “coalition” of students, expressed the inherent dilemma in navigating between care and complaint, saying:

Maybe that’s my own contribution to the problem—if I had been sterner to begin with maybe they wouldn’t have run with it the way they did. I’m still figuring out how I could have done this better—what is my responsibility in this. . . . I tried so hard to be as available as possible to the students in this (course). I felt like I was doing everything and it’s still not enough.

That same tension was captured by one faculty member’s experience with an academic integrity violation. Following the procedure meant calling the student in with another faculty member present, which the instructor recognized could feel overwhelming to the student. In this case, however, the student arrived with a parent and the situation became one of complaint because the parent made claims about the faculty member’s instruction based on the student’s reporting that were not true. This situation put the untenured interviewee’s reputation in question in front of a colleague. While the faculty member did not face professional repercussions, in the end there was still a feeling of personal responsibility even though it was the process that put the student in a position where complaint felt like a viable alternative. The faculty member concluded: “I liked that there’s a procedure in place because . . . I can rely on it... [But] I feel like I failed [the student] by following the process, because then [the student] withdrew and didn’t finish the class.” The opportunity to educate the student about academic integrity and for the student to complete the class successfully was thus lost.

Navigating Tensions around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The qualitative data were also striking with regard to some of the challenges women faculty experienced with student complaints. Although female faculty did not report receiving more student complaints on the survey, when asked to talk about such experiences, many women raised gender as a factor. One respondent summed up the tenor of these comments, saying:

As a female professor, I have to overcome certain issues with students that my male counterparts do not. Students judge me more harshly in general because I do not think they are used to seeing women in leadership roles and expect us to just be "nice" vs enforcing standards and rigor.

In interviews, women were also more likely than men to report student incivility and intimidation associated with complaints, recounting being called derogatory names, experiencing physical aggression such as being cornered in their offices, and being bullied by students who coordinated complaints. Women further expressed concern that being the object of student complaints could adversely affect perceptions about their professional competence and thus their progression through the ranks. For example, an untenured female interviewee who had been targeted by multiple students with complaints that were ultimately determined to be unfounded reported feeling that she was “on the Dean’s radar in a way that you didn’t want to be.”

Faculty members categorized as underrepresented minorities similarly linked student complaints to student perceptions regarding competence. One respondent stated the issue succinctly: “As a non-white faculty member, I have to overcome low student expectations about my performance and professionalism.” To address this issue and avoid student complaints, multiple underrepresented minority faculty members reported developing a highly authoritative classroom persona. At the same time, they often lamented the fact that they could not be as open or unguarded with their students as their colleagues. Fear of student complaints also produced an unwillingness to tackle controversial issues, especially if they did not have tenure. “You cannot be seen as ‘pushing’ an agenda” and “You do not want to rock the boat” were common sentiments.

These comments were related to a general faculty concern about navigating mixed messages about the university’s diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals. To offer some context, this concern was not surprising given the highly charged nature of teaching about racism and sexism, and the fact that this historically predominantly white university has recently seen steady growth in its percentage of underrepresented minorities among students (as of Fall 2020, 19% of 20,023 students as opposed to 11% of 17,587 in 2012), while the percentage of underrepresented faculty members has remained low (8% to 11% over the same period). The appointment of DEI liaisons across campus and a Chief Diversity Officer, as well as a focus on culturally responsive teaching and diversifying the curricula, all reflect the campus emphasis on DEI.

While our participants expressed support for the University’s efforts in this regard, our respondents often spoke about the challenges of teaching about racism and sexism. For instance, faculty members said: “I try to limit discussions on topics related to issues (race, gender, justice, etc.) that could lead to a student becoming offended”; and “If I’m being

honest, I am very concerned about being accused of racism. I tip toe and I know I shouldn't, but an unfair accusation could ruin someone's career and livelihood." Other faculty members told us that they decided not to continue teaching units about race and courses of particular interest to underrepresented students due to fear that the administration would automatically validate student perceptions. One faculty member said:

In two of my classes that used to have a race unit, I dropped it.... Frankly I don't think you're going to get any support from the University at all on anything racially oriented if a student files a complaint, period.

Another added: "It's fraught subject matter and I have seen that this administration will not protect academic free speech and academic freedom and anything you do on any given day in that course—at least the way I was teaching it—is risky." This respondent went on to note the incongruity between the University pushing DEI goals when faculty members perceive a real risk of doing that work: "I don't see how [the university] can keep demanding faculty create a more diverse, inclusive curriculum and then . . . turn the complaint process over to be driven by student feelings." The fear in these cases is not simply of student complaints *per se* but of what the administration will do when a student complains.

Uncertainty about the Administrative Response

Many participants in this study expressed an uneasiness about administrative response to student complaints. As one faculty member stated, "The balance between protecting students and protecting due process for faculty has always been difficult . . . The answer lies in checks and balances, the presumption of innocence, and a confidential process."

Faculty members routinely emphasized the importance of the department chair in the complaint process, as the following comment indicates: "If you're lucky they go to the chair" rather than "[going] straight to the dean, provost, chancellor." Still, this assessment was often about trust: "My former chair was the one who responded wonderfully well; I doubt that our current chair would do the same." Faculty members describing good experiences with chairs in complaint situations highlighted procedural fairness as key (e.g., seeking faculty input and guaranteeing both sides are heard). By contrast, one faculty member, whose student's complaint against them was backed by multiple levels of the administration, described the process that unfolded as "capricious" and "arbitrary." Indeed, a lack of faith in procedural fairness was especially noteworthy as respondents described complaints going up the chain of command, as the following comments suggest: "As I see my colleagues deal with student complaints, regardless of whether they are founded or

unfounded, I see that the university—deans, Office of Student Conduct, college lawyer, Title IX officers—always backs the student” and

The general feeling among my faculty colleagues is that IF a situation arose where a student did make a complaint against a faculty member, the faculty feel absolutely certain that the University would invariably rule on the side of the student (AGAINST the faculty member).

This skepticism over procedural fairness also results in an overall sense of institutional vulnerability, which for some was exacerbated by being untenured, as in this NTT faculty member’s statement: “As an NTT faculty member I worry about the impacts of student complaints/evaluations as it could jeopardize my position.”

Still, it is notable that in making assessments of administrator response, faculty members were also cognizant of the various constituencies to which administrators must respond as well as the factors that shape administrator options. For instance, they identified thorny issues with parents: “That one student who’s going to make a real big stink about it, then parents get involved, and it really just makes everyone’s job more difficult, where I think sometimes it may just be easier to side with the students.” Additionally, faculty members routinely mentioned the role of social media and the university’s management of its reputation: “Loud social media complaints prompt anxious and accommodating responses from administrators”; “Students have been out of bounds with the use of social media to punish professors who they do not like or disagree with rather than use institutional processes. The administration, by not formulating an appropriate response, has encouraged this behavior”; and

[A student complaint] would suddenly become all about perception and . . . it wouldn’t matter what I had to say about it as much as what would public opinion be. I would not be their priority and the student wouldn’t even be their priority—public opinion would be their priority [as in] how does this make [the University] look as this gets out on social media and becomes a thing.

Indeed, a faculty member who became the target of a student’s social media campaign that called for their firing described it as an “extra-judicial process” which resulted in a loss of trust in the administration: “The university was willing to throw me under the bus to make it stop. I thought at some point the university would stand up for me but it never happened.”

Impacts on Teaching

Not surprisingly, comments indicated that the fear of administrative reproach was directly tied to the four impacts on teaching that we

identified as stemming from the fear of student complaints: increased caution and conscientiousness, self-censorship, the reduction of rigor, and demoralization. These results proved intriguing because they reflected how a faculty member's perception of the teaching environment (whether it be on campus or in the larger political world) shaped their approach to the classroom. We take each of the four impacts in turn.

Increased Caution and Conscientiousness

Faculty members often framed increased conscientiousness as a positive. For instance: "I make sure that students feel they can approach me and talk about issues before they become problems" or even "I just make sure to be extra mindful of how I phrase and present things." For some faculty members, however, this degree of caution was experienced as burdensome. One typical respondent said: "I spend a lot of time and energy trying to preemptively avoid student complaints, rather than spending that energy truly working towards equity in the classroom." Another talked about the level of work both within and outside the classroom: "I burn myself out (e.g., trying to respond to all their emails, meet their varied expectations, etc.) so as to avoid student complaints."

Self-censorship

Faculty members consistently reported extreme care with their choice of material or a decision to exclude particular units, as detailed in this comment: "There are some topics that I think would be valuable to discuss, but I'm afraid to touch them. The nature of my field involves controversial issues, but hyperpartisanship makes it perilous." Others detailed a reluctance to speak frankly; most bluntly, one respondent said, "I have to be careful about everything I say. It's like walking through a minefield every day." Notably, these behaviors often were characterized as stemming from fear of student reaction: "I worry about upsetting students"; "the complaints that I worry about are political"; "students will be resentful when . . . their views are challenged"; and "I'm afraid to say anything of substance in class and tiptoe around topics because of how students might react, that they may be offended and make a big issue out of it."

Other faculty members went a step further by adding concerns about administrative response: "I'm reluctant to challenge some students in some situations because I know that if a student files a complaint or takes to social media to complain, the administration will not support me" and "It is depressing, but the risks of being canceled are significant and I think the administration would cave." Additionally, some faculty members linked their self-censorship directly to their lack of faith in the administration to defend academic freedom if a student complained; one faculty member said: "My chair and Dean put students' concerns over academic freedom."

Reduction in Rigor

Reductions in academic rigor were commonly mentioned by respondents, and not always in response to student complaints or fear of them. Typical comments included: “I have reduced the academic rigor of my courses; “I’m too lenient”; and

I inflate student grades, offer banal and pointless commentary on subpar work, and generally do not consider myself a professor any longer but a minor obstacle in the path of students' sense of entitlement to both praise, exceptionality, and finally, a college degree.

Sometimes, however, the link between a reduction in academic rigor and complaints or fear of complaints was direct: “Course standards and academic rigor has been sacrificed for sure in the interest of not causing trouble for myself”; “I have to be more lax and forgiving when students are clearly abusing the academic system. No protection for faculty”; and

I am afraid that by failing students that really should have been failed that I threaten my job. I do think about it, and so what I had to do is think about how to manage this in a way that wasn't giving them the grades they didn't deserve but also not having their grades be so low they go and complain.

Even though the survey asked respondents to exclude student complaints on SETs, many faculty members described a connection between SETs and rigor. One respondent summed up that link in this way: “Student evaluations initiated the demise of academic rigor in higher education. Student complaints are just a byproduct of student evaluations, which have reduced the student and teacher hierarchy to that of a buyer and seller with Yelp™ reviews.” For others, a lack of administrative support for anything

other than student satisfaction undercut rigor, as heard in comments such as:

If the University and Colleges would support faculty more in student complaints, this would tremendously help with rigor, work satisfaction, and retaining employees. It is hard to do our job when we fear student complaints and no administrator support. Moreover, student customer satisfaction culture does not promote academic rigor.

Demoralization

The mention of work satisfaction and faculty retention explains a related finding: faculty demoralization. Faculty expressed demoralization when

they felt that they could no longer do the work they entered the profession to do. Some comments reflected a sadness toward this perceived shift in the academic environment, as with this observation: “I have lost trust in students' good will and/or desire to learn mostly because of hearing of other faculty experiences with complaining and aggressively unhappy students who act out.” Another faculty member described a student complaint about a professor going viral on social media, saying “a million people saw it—and that’s a scary place to be in.” Others lamented the deprofessionalization of the faculty, including a loss of academic freedom and a rise in student academic entitlement: “I don't feel like I have academic freedom anymore, despite the fact I have prided myself on being relevant, inclusive, and informed as it pertains to today's student. Looking forward to retiring soon.” Others were blunt:

I don't like teaching anymore. I feel like students are constantly judging what I say in class against what their social media feeds tell them. . . . They seem to want to believe that they are just as knowledgeable about a subject as the professor. . . . There's no respect for expertise.

Notably, the women faculty we interviewed were more likely than men to express anguish when describing receiving complaints using words such as “devastating,” “hurt,” “astonished,” “crushed,” “beaten down,” and “intense and emotional.”

Discussion

Our findings suggest that many faculty members consider student complaints to be a routine part of faculty work and feel capable of responding to them effectively. Confirming the work of Morrisette, Mukherjee et al., and Knepp, among others, most faculty respondents—including those who had been the subject of a complaint—place value on practices designed to create a learner-centered, collaborative classroom environment, including maintaining a climate of student support, developing and communicating clear classroom expectations and policies, and being open to students voicing concerns. Still, our findings further confirmed Pettit’s assertions that faculty members worry about the negative consequences of changing classroom norms and they expressed concern that what Scott characterizes as good administrative response would be lacking should a complaint arise.

Following Santoro, faculty respondents in this study often pointed to a conflict between their vision of higher education, which includes good teaching, and institutionally driven pedagogical policies, learning initiatives, and administrative enforcement processes. The discrepancy between faculty members’ commitment to the traditional open-minded liberal ethos on campus (Furedi vi) and what they see happening on campuses today may well explain our finding that faculty members reduce

rigor and self-censor. Faculty members often reported feeling pressured to cater to students and that finding the tipping point between creating a learner-centered environment and a “customer is always right” service mentality was challenging. This effort was particularly fraught for women, whose students often expect greater care and support from women faculty (Webber).

Our study confirms Redstone and Villasenor’s speculation that faculty self-censor, and points to one cause as a sense of mistrust in procedural fairness when student complaints arise. Particularly if complaints were made public on social media and brought the University negative publicity, faculty members perceived that the university would prioritize the institution’s reputation and “brand” above all else (Kwestel and Milano). With such deep skepticism about administrators’ willingness to support open inquiry and academic freedom, which are hallmarks of a professionalized faculty, it is not surprising that many faculty members approach their teaching with trepidation. Moreover, faculty members’ concerns over the university’s apparent willingness to validate student complaints of being harmed by their choice of subject matter or presentation method means that instructors struggle to balance an ethics of care with the discomfort inherent in robust discussions of fraught subject matter. Faculty members who fear job-related consequences for working to fulfill the university’s mission pull back, depriving students of both exposure to and debate of important educational materials and appropriate levels of collegiate challenge.

Finally, our findings indicated that, contrary to work showing bias against women on SETs (Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman), women were no more likely to report having received complaints than men. Still, as with Alexander-Snow and Lampman, women did report experiencing serious incivility and intimidation more often than men did, which could explain why a greater proportion of women faculty members reported demoralization and described the impact of student complaints as distressing. Nonetheless, what ultimately stands out in our findings is just how pervasive the impact of student complaints is for all faculty members—men and women, junior and senior, tenure-track and non-tenure-track.

Implications

Our findings suggest that all members of the university would benefit from having a consistent process for addressing student complaints that is clearly communicated and followed. Faculty and administrators might, for example, work together to develop complaint-response protocols geared to specific categories of typical complaints. Proper training of all university personnel and students in those protocols would give members of the university greater confidence in procedural fairness. To complement this effort, student support staff should consider emphasizing, at new student orientation and in other venues, the values of open inquiry and free expression that guide the higher education environment. Letting students

know that some emotional discomfort should be expected in college classes might mitigate expression-based complaints. Similarly, helping students understand the faculty role in determining course content, conduct, and methods of evaluation might mitigate expectation-based complaints (Whittington). All of these efforts are part of a broader push for reinvigorating the professionalization of the faculty.

Faculty members could benefit from professional development to build skills for handling controversial issues and setting academic and behavioral boundaries. Given faculty members' worries about being the object of complaints, they need support in finding ways to improve teaching that underscore a steadfast and explicit commitment to academic freedom, without which faculty might avoid teaching controversial and sensitive material. Our finding of faculty demoralization should motivate universities to investigate more fully faculty satisfaction with the teaching role. The COACHE Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey, for instance, connects faculty satisfaction in the classroom with "quality of students." A more comprehensive evaluation of faculty satisfaction with teaching would include consideration of faculty perceptions of the university's commitment to processes of procedural fairness in the adjudication of student complaints.

Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although we found some variance in faculty members' operational definitions of "complaint," which may have impacted our ability to conclusively determine complaint rates, measure the seriousness of complaints, or test for potential differences in complaint rates by gender and race, we learned about the full range of experiences faculty have had with formal and informal complaints. Our interviews led us to conclude that our survey data likely underreports the number of faculty who have experienced student complaints outside of SETs. For example, one study participant who had answered "no" to the question of experiencing complaints on the survey recalled, in the interview, having been embroiled in a grade dispute that went through the university's formal grade appeal process. For subsequent research, complaint could be defined more specifically using the categories of complaint we identified.

Also, because we chose not to limit the time frame on what could be reported, some faculty (e.g., professors, associate professors) simply had more time to experience student complaints than others (e.g., assistant professors, contingent faculty). Extensive teaching experience on its own may explain our findings regarding faculty rank, and may well explain the different faculty responses and/or perceptions of administrative responses. Accounting for years of teaching experience in subsequent work would be beneficial for understanding the dynamics of student complaints.

Further, while we asked faculty members if they taught controversial material and considered themselves rigorous teachers, we did not ask about class size or whether or not faculty members use

inclusive pedagogical techniques. It is possible that controlling for these variables would tell us even more about faculty experiences of student complaints and faculty reactions to them. Exploring this question is particularly important given the faculty members who told us that they believe they avoid student complaints by being particularly good and/or inclusive teachers.

Additionally, the timing of the survey was toward the end of a full year of classes shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. A sudden shift to online learning under extremely stressful circumstances could have given rise to some student complaints and/or lowered faculty morale. Multiple faculty members spoke about an increase in student complaints in this period, although others spoke about an uptick in complaints for a variety of reasons. If this study were replicated, greater attention could be given to the impact of course delivery mode on student complaints and faculty responses to them.

While we did not examine or measure a breakdown in faculty authority vis-à-vis students, our qualitative findings suggest, and future research should examine, a potential connection between student complaints, students' academic entitlement, and a diminished respect for faculty authority. Conceivably, the move toward an institutional emphasis on student satisfaction, however well-intended, could enable student academic entitlement and increase the frequency of student complaints.

While our findings reveal that student complaints against women may take distinct forms and also impact women differently than men, further research should explore these questions in greater depth. Comparing case studies of student complaints and examining gender in connection with age, rank, race, class size, and subject matter taught could shed further light on the role of gender.

Finally, replication of this study at other institutions, such as historically minority-serving institutions, private liberal arts schools, community colleges, and those with more diverse faculty populations would be worthwhile. This would add to our understanding of faculty responses to student complaints in different institutional settings.

Endnotes

¹ $\chi^2 = 1.13, p > .15; \chi^2 = 0.93, p > .30$, respectively.

² $\chi^2 = 1.43, p > .20; \chi^2 = 0.23, p > .60; \chi^2 = 0.62, p > .40$, respectively.

³ $\chi^2 = 3.35, p < .05$

⁴ $\chi^2 = 3.42, p < .05$

⁵ $\chi^2 = 16.44, p < .01$

⁶ $\chi^2 = 0.31, p > .50$

⁷ $\chi^2 = 4.98, p < .05$

⁸ $\chi^2 = 16.81, p < .01$

⁹ $\chi^2 = 17.65, p < .01$

¹⁰ $\chi^2 = 4.92, p < .05$

¹¹ $\chi^2 = 8.71, p < .05$

¹² $\chi^2 = 50.41, p < .01$

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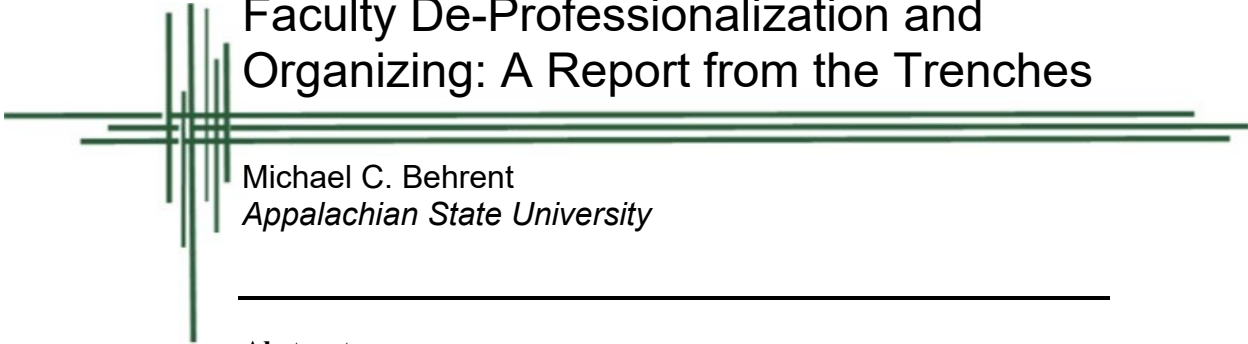
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Faculty De-Professionalization and Organizing: A Report from the Trenches

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Abstract

This essay draws on the author's personal experiences at a public university in North Carolina to reflect on the implications of the de-professionalization of the professorate for academic organizing. It begins by considering the evolving contexts that have undermined professors' ability to organize: a declining demand for academic labor; the rise of university administrators with a distinct set of interests and professional culture; and professors' lack of solidarity and disinclination to advocate for their collective interests. Next, drawing on Laurence Vesey's classic history of American colleges, and particularly his insight that the academic profession has flourished historically largely because of the "incoherence" of institutions of higher learning, the essay argues that the "salutary neglect" that professors long benefited from is ending. As institutions strive for greater internal coherence, faculty autonomy is threatened. This is apparent in the policy implications of budget cuts, political interference, and cutthroat competition to enroll students. Finally, the essay argues that one possible solution to the problems of de-professionalization and professors' declining ability to organize is for faculty to reclaim the language of privilege. As French labor history illustrates, "privilege" was a term that once referred to special rights that guild laborers were accorded by virtue of their skills. Embracing the idea that faculty should reasonably expect special treatment (which does not mean that they should endorse unjustified social hierarchies) could motivate faculty to resist the troubling headwinds facing their profession.

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A basic reality of economic life is that, from time to time, certain jobs die. In his classic study *The Making of the English Working Class*, the historian E. P. Thompson spoke in moving terms about the fate of the handloom weavers in the early nineteenth century. The weavers had built an entire way of life around what proved to be no more than a transitional phase in the development of industrial labor. Thompson's attention to such laborers' efforts to resist proponents of inexorable "progress" led him, famously, to denounce "the enormous condescension of posterity" (Thompson 12).

In many respects, the plight of the twenty-first-century college professor does not seem so different from Thompson's story of handloom weavers. In both cases, a comfortable and meaningful way of life established itself on a form of labor that proved—or will soon prove—surprisingly short-lived. Indeed, it is entirely possible that the tenure-line college professor that emerged as a prominent twentieth-century profession may soon go the way of the nineteenth-century weaver. Both forms of work gave rise to a way of life anchored in well-defined communities, a sense of professional pride and achievement, and a modest but relatively stable standard of living. Yet each of these professions was impoverished, sidelined, and ultimately dismantled by new forms of economic organization that derided the older model as costly, inefficient, and backward-looking—an irritating obstacle on progress' glorious path. The consciousness of many contemporary professors, like those of nineteenth-century weavers, is "haunted by the legend of better days" (Thompson 269). We may be fast approaching the moment when many of the staples of academic life—"coming up for tenure," contentious department meetings, "writing lectures," and research seminars—will be as quaint and obsolete as the songs sung by the weavers to keep time as they worked—an historical "blind alle[y]" in a triumphal narrative in which "[o]nly the successful ... are remembered" (Thompson 12).

Of course, Thompson's point is that the destruction of the handloom weavers' way of life was a formative experience in the "making of the English working class" as a class conscious and (for a time) formidable political force. It is at this point that the analogy between pre-industrial laborers and college professors breaks down. For the academic profession is hardly on the cusp of a new era of activism. Indeed, the obsolescence of the academic profession (or at least of a significant subsection of it) has had a debilitating effect on traditional forms of organization and is likely to be a major impediment to faculty efforts to advocate for their interests. While faculty organizing still exists, it has been significantly impeded by the transformation of the profession (notably the substitution of full-time tenured faculty with part-time or contingent non-tenure-line faculty). How does one organize a dying profession? As a tenured professor at a state university, I have tried—mostly unsuccessfully. Though this essay offers no answers to this crucial question, it draws on my experience to consider the connection between

professionalization and organization, and the consequences of the decline of the former on the latter.

In attempting to make sense of my own limited involvement in trends in shaping higher education, I will focus on what have been, historically, the primary conditions of possibility of faculty organizing: the constitution of professors as a profession and institutions that recognize and respect this profession. From these starting points, I explore three interrelated claims. First, a number of factors have contributed, in recent decades, to the undermining of the academic profession and the ability of professors to uphold their professional status. Second, the academic profession, during its heyday in the twentieth century, was able to govern and organize itself (to a degree) because universities practiced a form of salutary neglect, allowing professors to pursue their work largely on their own terms so long as it did not overtly conflict with goals set by administrators and governing boards. A major trend in recent years has been the *end* of this salutary neglect, compelling administrators and boards, for a variety of reasons, to exercise more centralized control, in a way that has deprived faculty of their former autonomy. Finally, I propose a comparison between guild workers in prerevolutionary France and contemporary American college professors, showing how, in both instances, reformers attacked the “privileged” status of these two (very different) forms of labor. I argue that faculty should consider reclaiming and placing a positive spin on the rhetoric of privilege to advocate for their work, despite the inauspicious times.

My insights derive from my experience serving in various faculty advocacy roles between 2017 and 2022. I teach at a public university in North Carolina, where the state university system has become highly politicized ever since the Republican Party won control of the state legislature in 2010. I served as a faculty senate chair at an institution whose leadership believes that it is a pragmatic necessity to placate conservative forces. I also happened to hold these roles during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, between 2019 and 2021, when already existing tensions resulting from the Republican-dominated legislature’s agenda were brought to a fever pitch, notably when my university reopened (more or less) in fall 2020, despite the fact that many faculty (as well as many students and staff) felt threatened by this choice. Indeed, as a result of this decision, the faculty senate that I presided voted no confidence in the university’s chancellor (i.e. president), which resulted in a *de facto* but never formally acknowledged boycott of the senate by the university administration for my entire second year as chair. Around the same time, I was president of the North Carolina Conference of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). In 2021, the national AAUP issued a major report on the UNC System, which identified systemic problems relating to shared governance, academic freedom, and institutional racism. The report—as well as the AAUP’s subsequent condemnation of the UNC System (American Association of University

Professors)¹—attracted some attention at the state and national level. But at the end of the day, the report and the condemnation were quickly drowned out by the din of other national crises. The inability of the faculty to make its voice heard through a no-confidence vote and an AAUP condemnation—which, once upon a time, would have been regarded as alarm bells signaling genuine institutional crisis—have shaped my outlook to a significant degree.

The Changing Context of Academic Professionalization

A variety of factors have contributed, in recent years, to the undermining of the academic profession. The constitution of the faculty as a profession—particularly the right to make key decisions relating to professional governance—has historically been the primary vector driving faculty organizing in the United States. The gradual erosion of the academic profession is a problem in itself, but also has significant consequences for faculty organizing.

First, the ability of professors to organize effectively has been undermined by a declining demand for academic labor, particularly professionalized academic labor. Effective academic organizing is, in other words, strongly correlated to the demand for professionalized faculty. The evidence supports this claim in the affirmative as well as the negative. The takeoff period in American higher education occurred after the Second World War. Spurred by economic growth and the demands of a modern economy, an unprecedented number of Americans attended college. In 1940, 5.5% of American men and 3.8% of American women had college degrees; by 1973, the figures were, respectively, 16% and 9.6% (Statista Research Department). Furthermore, the federal government, during these years, invested massively in higher education, through such legislation as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (or "GI Bill"), the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958, and the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA). In this context, as universities were expanding, offering more degrees to more students, recruiting professional faculty became a priority. To offer a modern, state-of-the-art education and to compete with other campuses, institutions prioritized the recruitment of a professionalized faculty. Most importantly, this meant that administrators and governing boards tended to heed faculty's own conception of what "professional" meant. Hiring faculty with doctorates and offering them tenure contracts (trends that were already advanced before the war) became the norm. By 1969, only 3% of full-time faculty were off the tenure track (Gerber 119).

The widespread demand for professional faculty encouraged and strengthened professors' organization. Faculty organizations—the AAUP first and foremost—flourished and acquired an ability to set professional norms, many of which became, and remain, enshrined in governing documents and faculty handbooks. In 1966, the American Council on Education (for administrators), and the Association of Governing Boards

of Universities and Colleges joined the AAUP in issuing a “Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities,” which, while defining the academic institution as a “joint effort” (“Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities”) carved out an essential role for the faculty in institutional governance. It declared that faculty should have “primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process.” It stipulated that faculty should control appointments, tenure, and dismissals, adding that on such matters, governing boards and senior administration should “concur with the faculty judgment except in rare instances.” The faculty, moreover, should at minimum have the right to “participate” in the formulation of “policies and procedures governing salary increases.” Finally, an “agency should exist for the presentation of the views of the whole faculty”—typically, a faculty senate or council. Taking advantage of the demand for their skills, faculty in these years formed vibrant professional organizations, used these organizations and their market position to claim a role in university governance, and turned these governance practices into tools to advocate for their interests on an ongoing basis. Summing up this high moment of faculty power, the historian Larry Gerber writes: “The years from the beginning of the World War Two to the mid-1970s witnessed both the rise of American universities to a position of global preeminence in the world of higher education and the development of a broad consensus on the desirability of significant faculty involvement in institutional governance” (Gerber 81).

My own university’s history fully supports this correlation between the demand for professionalized faculty and faculty power. The institution that became Appalachian State University was founded in 1899 in a remote, mountainous region of northwestern North Carolina. It soon became a public university devoted almost exclusively to teacher training. In these early years, doctorates were enough of a novelty that professors who earned them were celebrated in the student newspaper (“Appalachian Professors Are Working Towards Doctorate”). In the postwar period, Appalachian brought itself in line with national trends. In 1963, President William H. Plemmons commissioned an Ad Hoc Committee on Faculty Graduate Study to investigate how many faculty had advanced degrees and how these numbers had changed over time. The committee found that while only 20 faculty out of 82 had doctorates in 1953, the ratio had risen to 55 out of 154 by 1963. The committee strongly encouraged faculty members to pursue Ph.D.’s (“Committee Recommends Faculty Graduate Study” 1). Prioritizing professional development in this way aligned with the institution’s long-term goals. In 1964, Appalachian’s Board of Trustees approved a plan to steer the university away from its focus on teacher training and turn it into a “multipurpose” college, offering a range of degrees and a wide palette of academic programs. The plan noted: “Qualified faculty members in academic departments are more easily

secured inasmuch as many persons prepared in academic disciplines perceive themselves in terms of disciplines which have an inherent independent status rather than that of a 'service' status to professional education" ("Trustees Approve Study Made on Liberal Arts College for Appalachian" 4). Clearly, Appalachian's institutional priorities aligned with the standards embraced by the academic profession.

As the institution demanded qualified Ph.D.'s, it introduced and embraced shared governance. In this way, the administration acknowledged the faculty's importance while also providing a mechanism for advancing their goals and interests. Appalachian's Faculty Senate held its first meeting on May 12, 1967 ("Appalachian State Teachers College, Faculty Senate Record" May 12, 1967). As it prepared to be upgraded to a university status (previously, it was called Appalachian State Teachers College) and to be incorporated into a multiple-campus state public university system, Appalachian followed the lead of several other North Carolina institutions: the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Faculty Council was founded in 1951, North Carolina State University's Faculty Senate in 1954, and East Carolina University's in 1965. In an article in *The Appalachian*, the Senate was described as providing faculty with an opportunity for "direct participation in the processes of decision-making affecting the life of Appalachian"—language that remained in the Faculty Constitution for years. In the same article, the director of institutional research was quoted as saying that "the birth of a faculty senate is a pretty big step for a college of Appalachian's nature" ("Faculty Senate" 1). In early July 1967, shortly after the institution formally became Appalachian State University, President Plemmons met with the Faculty Senate to discuss this change. He believed that the future would place greater "emphasis on the faculty," a prioritization of graduate work, and "a need for top-flight people." "The Senate," he added "was counted a large potential factor in effecting these developments" ("Appalachian State Teachers College, Faculty Senate Record" July 6, 1967).

As the example of Appalachian demonstrates, the institutional prioritization of professionalized faculty aligned with opportunities for professors to advocate for their interests and sustain governance structures that allowed them to advance their interests on an ongoing basis. Needless to say, faculty face greater challenges in advancing their interests and sustaining effective governance structures when institutions are *not* invested in a professionalized faculty. Any number of contemporary trends contribute to institutional preference for a de-professionalized faculty. Because they can be paid less and terminated more easily, non-tenure track faculty may be prioritized at the expense of tenure-track faculty. An enrollment drop-off and accompanying emphasis on "student success" can lead to an almost exclusive prioritization of teaching—and specifically teaching aimed at pleasing and retaining students—to the detriment of scholarship and service responsibilities (with all that the latter entail in terms of professional status). Political pressures, particularly at public

institutions, can call into question faculty rights (notably tenure) that are denied to the labor force at large. At present, these and related trends have created overwhelming incentives to chip away at the professional status that faculty came to take for granted in the postwar years. Not only are faculty less able to organize, but administrations are less disposed to cooperate with faculty (whether organized or not), and institutions designed to advance faculty interests (like faculty senates) are becoming weaker. At Appalachian, in the wake of a contentious period of faculty-administrative relations that came to a head with the COVID-19 pandemic, efforts were made to modify the Faculty Constitution. Specifically, proposals were made that struck a passage that defined the Faculty Senate's goal as that of providing faculty with an opportunity for "direct participation in the processes of decision-making affecting the life" of the university—language that had existed in the Faculty Constitution since 1967. This proposal is currently on the verge of passing—by a faculty vote, no less.

Though I have emphasized dwindling institutional interest in a professionalized faculty, other factors have changed the conditions in which faculty are able to organize, generally in a negative way. Two deserve mention. The first is the curious phenomenon of the expansion of university administration—what Benjamin Ginsburg dubbed the "all-administrative university" (Ginsburg). This trend—out-of-control presidential salaries, the metastatic growth of administrative fiefdoms, the proliferation of vice-provostships and assistant-deanships—has been widely commented upon. But how does it relate to academic organizing? As I see it, the increasing importance of administrators has created a new, significant, and powerful constituency on university campuses with interests that are different from and often opposed to those of the faculty. University administration has always been hybrid work, requiring an ability to organize instruction, develop curricula, recruit and supervise students, work with governing boards, and manage business affairs, while also dealing with some of the idiosyncrasies that define American academic life, like college athletics and religious affiliations. For most of American higher education's history, however, university administrators were drawn primarily from the ranks of the faculty. This did not mean that they necessarily or even usually had a peaceful relationship with their faculty. But it did mean that administrators tended to appreciate and even identify with academic work and did, at some level, believe that universities were ultimately defined by their academic mission—specifically, teaching and research—even when administrators had to devote most of their day-to-day effort to tasks that were pragmatic, but which made academic work possible.

The growth of administration has disrupted this more symbiotic relationship with the faculty in several ways. First, administrators have acquired a caste-like consciousness through which they distinguish themselves from faculty, even when—as is still often the case—they began

their careers as professors. I became aware of this at my university when, in 2017, the University of North Carolina System (to which Appalachian belongs) issued a strategic plan that defined a dozen or so priorities, with the stipulation that chancellors on individual campuses identify several priorities that they would commit to achieving on their campus. My institution's chancellor, for instance, committed to rural enrollments, low-income completions, rural completions, closing low-income achievement gaps in undergraduate degree efficiency, and critical workforce credentials (Appalachian State University Five-Year Goals). Each year, the UNC System's Board of Governors monitored the institution's progress towards achieving these goals—and the campus itself devoted considerable resources (notably through administrative hires) to ensuring that these goals were met, and that this success was duly advertised. Chancellors' compensation and bonuses are directly tied to their ability to achieve these goals.

But rather than seeing this management technique as evidence of administrative venality or out-of-control administrative bloat, I am most struck by how it signals the emergence of a different professional culture within the university. I often described the website where the university trumpets its achievement of the System-mandated goals as the "chancellor's report card" or, more accurately, her annual report—of the same kind that I have to submit to my department chair each year. But whereas my annual report details classes I have taught, papers I have published, and committees I have served on, the chancellor's is a highly numerical report that focuses on enrollment numbers, student retention, and so on. Though her performance metrics do include things like degree completion and production, it has almost nothing to do, even at an aggregate or hierarchically superior level, with the type of work academics do, not even the aggregate scholarly achievements of the faculty. While there is some sense in which this has always been true of university administrators, it has not always been so to the same degree. At Appalachian, B. B. Dougherty, the university's founder (and, for a time, one of the longest-serving college presidents in the United States) would chair faculty meetings. Even until the 1970s, the university's president would list faculty publications and research achievements in his annual report to the Board of Trustees. Now, the idea that a governing board would be interested in what faculty actually do seems quaint, even silly. Boards and administrators view themselves as players in a great game—as higher education strategists, as the architects of their institution's imperialistic expansion, or, at minimum, as hard-nosed realists locked in a struggle to ensure their university's survival. What the little people do who fill the ranks of the faculty is of decidedly lesser importance.

This dramatic differentiation between the work of administrators and the work of faculty constitutes a serious obstacle to faculty organization. Shared governance procedures, faculty organizations, and concerns about professional status become seen by administrators as so

many impediments to the grand politics they feel compelled to pursue. These trends align broadly with the insight from labor history that the decline of models in which workers exercise considerable control over their workplace is often accompanied by “segmented” labor market, divided between an upper stratum of managers (or administrators) who are responsible for directing work and a lower stratum of ordinary workers (or professors) whose activities are increasingly repetitive and controlled (Gordon, Edwards, Reich; Edwards). At Appalachian, sustained faculty disgruntlement at the prospect of a return to in-person classes in fall 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, led the chancellor to announce that she and the provost would no longer meet directly with the faculty senate, a decision they upheld for the entire academic year. At the end of the day, upper administration did not want the business of reopening the university, which was seen as vital to ensuring high levels of enrollment that would preserve the university’s wellbeing, hindered by professors’ churlish whining.

The final obstacle to faculty organizing I wish to mention concerns the faculty itself—specifically, a mindset prevalent among faculty that may hinder their ability to act in their own best interest. The previous obstacles considered were objective—elements of the changing environment in which universities operate. This obstacle is subjective: the faculty’s downfall plays itself out not just in the world, but in ourselves—because we are underlings. By its nature, a mindset is difficult to characterize and even more difficult to establish with objective evidence. Still, its basic features can be painted with a few broad brushstrokes. First, academic work is not naturally susceptible to solidarity. Teaching and research tend to be solitary work, and hierarchical to boot. Committee work can be more collaborative, but it can also be competitive, and it is, in any case, generally devalued. Academic work tends to reward individuals who promote themselves, which also means promoting one’s field and even subfield in what is often a zero-sum game of allocating limited academic resources (money, time, and so on).

This leads to a second factor: faculty are extraordinarily status conscious. In academia, a line of work in which the monetary rewards are relatively modest (at least compared to other professions requiring a high level of education), success is measured by one’s standing and reputation. As in the military and the clergy, rank is constitutive of the academic profession. Most professors relate to their peers on the basis of a more or less explicit pecking order. A rare instance of cleverness I have seen on the part of my institution’s chancellor is the way she seems to require her staff to address all faculty using the honorific “doctor”—an insightful recognition of professorial vanity and the longing for recognition that accompanies it. In a profession organized on this basis, there are few natural incentives to think or act collectively, as status is diluted when it is shared. The only exception—and it is a significant one—concerns efforts to protect the profession itself—that is, to preserve the system in which

each faculty has a plausible chance to acquire the status and recognition they believe they can achieve.

The above-mentioned factors have long been part of the academic mindset. To these I would add another factor that is more recent or that, in any case, has become more apparent in recent years: faculty are often disinclined to advocate for themselves. Professors are typically civic-minded and socially conscious; yet despite these inclinations—and perhaps because of them—they are frequently averse to advocating for their own interests. This reticence takes several forms. Some faculty buy into what might be called the “student libel”—the notion that “it’s all about the students.” This claim is often advanced by administrators deliberately seeking to nip incipient professorial self-advocacy in the bud, on the preposterous grounds that faculty who seek to defend their profession are somehow harming students (one of the most effective organizing slogans I have seen is: “our work conditions are students’ learning conditions”). Even so, faculty can be susceptible to it. Second, professors often instinctively embrace a robust conception of equality, in ways that sit uncomfortably with the hierarchical structure of their profession. The resulting dilemmas can be quite genuine. On my campus (like many), the question of whether non-tenure track faculty should have the same voting rights as tenure-track and tenured faculty has given rise to considerable controversy. On the one hand, it seems unfair to disenfranchise non-tenure track faculty since their teaching is deemed of the same quality as their tenured colleagues (i.e., students do not get a discounted rate for classes taught by non-tenure track faculty). On the other, accepting equal voting rights on the grounds of equality makes tenure-track faculty complicit in the covert process to de-professionalize the professoriate by moving most appointments off the tenure track. In any case, the preference for equality can destabilize faculty’s consciousness of themselves as a distinct profession.

Finally, a well-meaning and in many ways admirable concern for social justice leads faculty to subordinate the defense of their own profession to more pressing, world-historical concerns, such as fighting racism and climate change. This is not to say that protecting the academic profession is more important than such epochal causes. Obviously, it is not. But professors can fail to consider that, if they are to continue engaging in such worthy causes, they must also make sure that the professoriate continues to exist. One can speculate about the reasons for this attitude—professors’ shame at their relative privilege, a sense of *noblesse oblige* that views self-advocacy as gauche. But its result is an unwillingness to engage in activism in the defense of their own profession.

The End of Salutory Neglect

The faculty’s declining professional status and its implications for organizing can also be considered a sign of the changing place of the American university in the broader society. Laurence Veysey’s *The*

Emergence of the American University (1965), offers a comprehensive and insightful history of American higher education and an acerbic account of the American university's peculiar "success." Though the colonial period and during the early republic had colleges—rigidly conservative institutions designed to inculcate moral attitudes rather than learning—the university proper began in the post-Civil War era, with the adoption of the European (and particularly German) model of institutions dedicated to higher learning and pure research. This fundamentally foreign ideal was grafted awkwardly onto Gilded Age society and sat uneasily with its hard-nosed, money-grubbing mindset. The purpose of these new and often expensive institutions that were founded in the closing decades of the nineteenth century was uncertain and, in any case, fiercely contested. According to Veysey, three distinct and largely incompatible ideals drove the post-Civil War university reform movement. The land-grant movement inspired institutions founded on the idea of utility, with a particular focus on agronomy and engineering, but also, more generally, on the idea that "any person [should] find instruction in any study" (as Ezra Cornell put it in 1868). Meanwhile, the imposing model of the German university system led to the founding of institutions focused entirely on research as higher education's primary goal—and even as an end in itself, distinct from teaching. Johns Hopkins, established in 1876, epitomized this conception of the university. Finally, in reaction to concerns about excessive utilitarianism or single-minded research, other universities began to promote the idea of disseminating culture—broadly, the liberal arts—as higher education's true purpose. In short, as higher education expanded, the purpose of universities became increasingly difficult to articulate in coherent terms.

According to Veysey, universities became fully American institutions by accepting that a fundamental disagreement existed over their purpose rather than resolving it. The "success of the American university" as it emerged in the early twentieth century was rooted in "its internal incoherence"—that is, in a "combination of interests" that are able to achieve relative harmony to the extent that they talk past and remain mostly ignorant of each other (Veysey 337). Universities sought to further the values and interests of the "urban middle class" and to meet their demand for practical education and opportunities for advancement in a capitalist society (Veysey 440). Yet at the same time, they also managed to nurture (particularly at the most prestigious institutions) a genuine culture of scholarship and higher learning, almost in spite of their recognized social function. Administrators, Veysey writes, "took pride in the accomplishments of their faculties, even if they did so in the manner of the neighborhood theater owner who never watches the films he books but keenly knows the drawing power of the actors" (Veysey 441). In the name of academic freedom, faculty advocated for "security, recognition, income, and power" (Veysey 393). But while they succeeded in achieving some of these goals, the struggle for power—for a faculty-centered

university—was most elusive: “Except for producing some unwieldy academic ‘senates’ and for encouraging somewhat greater departmental autonomy in the area of appointments, it bore little substantial fruit” (Veysey 393). What faculty gained instead, Veysey implies, was a form of salutary neglect. In the American university as it consolidated a century or so ago, “the scientist and the scholar could flourish, neither dominating the institution nor being too uncomfortably dominated by it” (Veysey 441).

Veysey provides an alternative—at once sardonic and sobering—to the myth of a “golden age” of higher education, in which administrators allegedly recognized the value of faculty insight on critical matters of university governance. For Veysey, shared governance, as it developed in the modern American university, was always a far cry from earlier (and failed) aspirations for real faculty control. Moreover, he sees shared governance as a modest concession to the faculty’s professional pride, resulting more from administrators’ indifference to certain domains of university life than from a genuine belief that university governance is a “joint effort.” Yet Veysey also, I believe, helps us to identify how universities have changed since the early-to-mid-twentieth century, where he ends his narrative. If the success of the earlier model universities was tied to its “internal incoherence,” the signal trait of the twentieth-century university is its aspiration for ever-greater *coherence*. Put differently, the awkward compromise that prevailed in the older model—between a university focused on pandering to students and alumnae, on the one hand, while tolerating the faculty’s desire for scholarship and learning, on the other—has been upended, as faculty have increasingly come under the direct control of administrators and boards. The salutary neglect that was once part of the implicit social contract of university life is ending, further undermining the already meager opportunities for faculty organization.

This trend towards greater institutional coherence and heightened control over the faculty has several causes. First, since the 1970s and particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the 2019-2021 COVID-19 pandemic, universities have faced never-ending budgetary challenges. To respond to these situations, universities have adopted a number of management techniques, often drawn from the business world. One such technique is program prioritization, which was first theorized in 1999 by Robert C. Dickeson, a former president of the University of Northern Colorado (Dickeson). In 2015, Academic Impressions, a higher education consulting firm with which Dickeson has been associated, defined the “challenge of program prioritization” in the following terms: “Colleges and universities of all sizes, types, and selectivity can no longer invest in academic programs and administrative services that are not critical to their mission or their market position, programs that in fact drain precious resources from star programs and limit the institution’s financial flexibility.” Consequently, “many institutions are engaging in efforts to rank and prioritize programs in order to reallocate resources from lower priority programs to higher ones” (“A Letter from Amit Mrig”). Facing a

forbidding budgetary environment, many institutions have adopted these strategies. Where once departments and programs could exist in relatively benign insulation from one another—consistent with Veysey’s idea of “incoherence”—program prioritization forces them to exist in a zero-sum environment. Each program is rendered acutely aware of its standing in relation to other programs and is forced to compete for limited resources.

In a similar vein, universities have, in recent years, been asked to determine the relative “return on investment” (ROE) of their academic programs. For example, in 2021, the North Carolina state legislature commissioned a return-on-investment study of the roughly 1800 programs offered across the University of North Carolina System’s 16 campuses, to be conducted by three firms (Deloitte, RPK Group and the Burning Glass Institute). The study was required to gather data on the number of students enrolled each program; the number of faculty and other staff employed by each program; the costs needed to offer the degree; a correlation between each degree and career prospects (notably income); and return-on-investment analyses on each program, state expenses, and student expenses. A UNC System administrator explained that the study would consider questions such as: “How many degrees are awarded, and how many students are actually impacted by those programs?” (Schlemmer). Like program prioritization, ROE seeks to create common criteria by which to evaluate academic programs, focusing on the measurable impact these programs have on students and taxpayers. In this context, it becomes increasingly difficult for faculty to engage *sub rosa* in scholarship and the residual forms of professional self-administration it implies. Every expense—salaries, faculty lines, course sizes, time—comes under the purview of administrators driven by cost-benefit concerns. Such trends also contribute to an academic version of the “deskilling hypothesis” explored by authors like Harry Braverman, which holds that workers lose control of the labor process as their work becomes less and less based on skill and they cede their former autonomy to an upper stratum of “mental” laborers (who, among other things, determine their labor’s value) (Braverman). The “incoherence” of universities that Veysey saw as their saving grace becomes, in an age of permanent budget crisis, inefficiencies that must be promptly resolved.

Another force driving the end of salutary neglect and furthering greater institutional coherence is political pressure, particularly on public institutions. Much has been made of efforts by several Republican-controlled state legislatures in the 2010s and early 2020s to curtail the perceived hegemony of progressive culture on university campuses, whether by protecting free speech (against “cancel culture”), limiting the teaching of “critical race theory,” and promoting greater “viewpoint diversity” (so that conservative students do not feel penalized). These efforts inevitably spark controversy and trigger indignant faculty to denounce threats to their academic freedom. Far more consequential, however, are political initiatives that make funding contingent on the

achievement of state-mandated “outcomes.” In many ways, these efforts are the result of a sustained campaign on the part of conservatives to argue that American higher education has become too costly and that public support for universities should henceforth be connected to their success in furthering specific goals—a campaign that has largely succeeded. To this end, state governments have increasingly required public universities to prioritize student retention, timely degree completion, and steering students towards jobs for which there is a recognized demand. In North Carolina, the UNC System recently adopted a new funding model that considers not only the student credit hours an institution generates them, but weights them based on “performance”—that is, the extent to which students are meeting goals set by the system’s Board of Governors (which itself is appointed by the state legislature). Significantly, chancellor salary packages are themselves linked to their institution’s success as defined by these measures. These state-mandated criteria also contribute to ending the salutary neglect that allowed faculty research and professional autonomy to flourish. And they have a much greater impact on academic labor than high-profile but ultimately superficial culture war initiatives aimed at “liberal professors.”

A final factor that is transforming the “incoherent” institutional structure that Veysey describes is enrollment *Realpolitik*, which reached a new level of intensity during the COVID-19 pandemic and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Preserving and enhancing student enrollment has become one of the primary obsessions of administrators and governing boards. The problem of enrollment is closely connected to the two previous factors, as university budgets often depend heavily on enrollment and politicians are frequently concerned with ensuring that public universities are financially solvent. During the pandemic, the UNC Board of Governors, as well as System and campus administrators, were alarmed by the prospect of students withdrawing and withholding their tuition if campuses continued to offer nothing more than online courses in Fall 2020. System leadership made it clear that all constituent institutions would reopen in the fall and that campus administrators would not have the discretion to close institutions for health concerns at will. Administrators also refused faculty requests that individual professors have the right to decide at their own initiative whether they would offer their classes in person, online, or in some hybrid format. Meanwhile, at other institutions (notably private ones), administrators and governing boards unilaterally suspended faculty handbooks and related provisions so that they could respond expeditiously to the financial challenges posed by the pandemic, many of which boiled down to enrollment problems. The impending “demographic cliff,” due to which an overextended higher education market will experience even greater competition for a dwindling number of students, is likely to exacerbate trends begun during COVID-19. The increasingly single-minded obsession of university leaders with enrollment will compel them to centralize decision-making, curtail faculty

autonomy, and bring under their authority matters they were once content to leave under the faculty's purview.

While Veysey encourages skepticism about the degree to which university governance was ever "shared," his study does indicate how the institutional evolution of the American university managed to give professors a degree of autonomy (which contributed to the illusion that they exercised real authority): a degree of institutional incoherence that allowed faculty to pursue their priorities (primarily research) while benefiting from a degree of salutary neglect from administrators and governing boards. I have argued that a major trend in contemporary higher education is the obsolescence of the model Veysey describes and its replacement by a far more "coherent" institutional structure, based on a considerable extension of administrative supervision over university life and efforts to orient the university in all its organizational variety towards a limited set of priorities. The implications for faculty organization are significant, however indirect. First, this trend limits forms of autonomy that faculty had long taken for granted: departmental hiring practices, opportunities for research, control over scheduling, control over the curriculum, and even the awarding of grades have all, due to these developments, come under increasing administrative scrutiny. Though it was never very substantial to begin with, shared governance has become even more paltry as a result. The forms of organization and professional control that faculty had at their workplace has diminished accordingly. Nor is it surprising that more formalized instances of faculty organization—AAUP chapters or unions—find this new environment unpropitious as well.

Reclaiming the language of privilege

While I have argued that professors' have a meager capacity for organization, I would like to conclude with an historical analogy that suggests one way in which faculty might resist these trends—though its very outlandishness might do more to underscore the profession's dim prospects than to point the way forward. Professors, I maintain, should argue that they *are* privileged—and rightly so.

In making this case, I suggest a comparison between the current situation in American higher education and the final decades of France's Old Regime and the early years of the French Revolution—and specifically to attitudes towards labor during either period. In both instances, labor was organized through a system that gave workers the right to control key aspects of their trade: who could practice it, what professional norms should apply, and so on. In both cases, reformers maintained that the existing labor system was inefficient, expensive, monopolistic, restrictive, and contrary to the common good. The reformers made proposals to modernize the system that undercut the ability of workers to regulate their own labor practices. And in the case of prerevolutionary France, workers challenged these reforms by arguing that

the latter only appeared to serve the general interest—and, in so doing, the workers invoked the rhetoric of privilege. What if today’s faculty were to do the same?

From the Middle Ages to the French Revolution, labor in France was organized by the guild (or corporate) system. Guilds were woven into the essentially hierarchical fabric of old regime society: they occupied a distinct place in the social pecking order, and they, in turn, were hierarchically organized. Each guild existed by royal decree, which allowed a particular trade—cobblers or coopers, say—to formulate a self-governing document or “statute.” The rights defined in these statutes were considered “privileges” (*privilèges*). The historian William H. Sewell, Jr. (my main source for this account) writes: “Literally, *privilèges* were ‘private laws,’ that is, laws that applied exclusively to a single person, either to a collective fictitious person or to an individual ... To the extent that a collective or particular person was governed by private law, the person was necessarily given immunity from common law” (Sewell 27). A guild’s privileges included first and foremost the exclusive right to practice a trade, but also the right (and responsibility) of policing the behavior of guild members, ensuring the quality of goods produced, and the regulation of the training of apprentices—most notably the crucial step whereby a “journeyman” (an entry-level craftsmen) became a “master,” typically by demonstrating proficiency in his craft through the production of a masterwork.

Without rehearsing the history of the academic profession, it is hard to deny that it was founded on principles that broadly resemble the organization of skilled labor in old regime France. With the rapid spread of colleges and universities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American institutions made the Ph.D. the main criterion for access to the profession (drawing on practices developed in early nineteenth-century Germany), thus defining the conditions of access to their profession. Both the awarding of doctorates and academic tenure were based on the journeyman/master process, whereby an apprentice, following a probationary period, was admitted into the profession after demonstrating competency (with a dissertation, a form of “masterwork”) to the satisfaction of current professionals. Of course, this system operated in the framework not of a hierarchical society but of democratic-egalitarian one (at least in the sense of equality before the law). But the idea of a hierarchically organized, self-governed profession concerned with regulating the quality of its work and maintaining professional standards shaped the American academic profession as much as it structured skilled labor in prerevolutionary France.

By the second half of the eighteenth-century, the guild system was under attack. Inspired by Enlightenment-inspired thought, reformers criticized the guilds on a variety of grounds, most of which boiled down to the claim that they restrained economic freedom in a way that limited the nation’s wealth. In 1774, a prominent reformer serving as a minister to the

king issued a decree abolishing the guilds. The decree sought to ensure “to commerce and industry the entire liberty and the full competition which they ought to enjoy.” But as Sewell explains, the decree also blamed the guilds for limiting the practice of trades to those who had obtained masterships, imposing excessively long apprenticeship periods, saddling consumers with high costs (due to the guilds’ monopolistic character), and restraining innovation. The upshot of the decree was that any individual wishing to practice a trade simply had to declare their intention to do so to the local police (Sewell 72-73).

The movement to reform higher education does not perfectly match the anti-guild movement of the eighteenth century, but it does bear a family resemblance to it. The primary argument leveled against American universities by would-be education reformers is not their restrictions on liberty, but their exorbitant cost—though the debate about for-profit universities, which frequently side-step the professional norms found in more traditional institutions, does recall the pre-revolutionary debate about the consequences of disconnecting skilled labor from guild membership. Since at least the 2008 financial crisis, conservatives have made the high cost of college education a major talking point—and liberals have rarely fought back with any conviction. Though serious reformers do recognize that the reasons why higher education is so expensive are many, at least some have connected it to the organization of the academic profession, particularly the tenure system and the focus on research (which is roughly analogous to the early modern focus on skilled labor). Thus in 2009, an article on the American Enterprise Institute’s website declared: “While focusing on phenomena such as the overbuilding of palatial campus facilities, however, these accounts continue to pay short shrift to the factor most responsible for driving tuition inflation—the cost of tenure-track faculty” (Hess). As in the French case, reformers have emphasized the way their goals contribute to the common good, implicitly criticizing the status quo as narrowly defending faculty interests to the detriment of other stakeholders. This is evident in the discussion surrounding a policy adopted by the University of Georgia System in 2021 that was widely seen as a harbinger of the impending abolition of tenure as a higher education norm. The policy makes it possible to terminate tenured professors who “fail” two annual reviews and a subsequent professional improvement plan. A System representative commented: “The goals of the changes are to support career development for all faculty as well as ensure accountability and continued strong performance from faculty members after they have achieved tenure,” adding: “ultimately, we all have the same goal” (Heyward). This remark is striking—and typical—in the way that it not only takes for granted that tenure does *not* foster “continued strong performance,” but also gloats in its egalitarian rhetoric: subjecting senior tenured faculty to the same degree of scrutiny as junior or non-tenure-track faculty proves, in short, that the administration believes in *equality*—in a way that makes one nostalgic for the days when boards treated faculty,

with frank condescension, as “hired men,” without having to protest their progressive bona fides while seeking cheaper labor and greater market flexibilities. In short, like the French opponents to the guild system, contemporary critics of tenure maintain that they are pursuing ends that will redound to the common good.

In old regime France, not everyone was convinced by the reformers’ arguments against guilds. Indeed, the royal court that was responsible for registering the decree invoked a different conception of freedom to oppose the unfettered economic freedom espoused by the reforms. While freedom is all well and good, the court noted, it should not be conflated with “an unlimited liberty that knows no other law but caprice and admits no rules but those that it makes itself.” If it were, then liberty, far from being the “source of wealth,” would instead become “an occasion for fraud and plunder, and the inevitable result would be the total annihilation of the arts and of artisans, of confidence and of commerce” (Sewell 74). The decree was eventually rescinded, and the reformer who proposed it dismissed. Yet only a little over a decade later, the French Revolution would complete the reformers’ work, permanently abolishing the guild system. In addition to the arguments in favor of the guilds recognized by the court, it is also crucial to understand how important the idea of privilege was to early modern labor. True, privilege was inseparable from old regime society’s essential inequality. But inequality also meant that everyone (or almost) was privileged, in that they all had laws and standards that were unique to their place in the social hierarchy. As Sewell argues, this was particularly evident in the consciousness of skilled laborers. Owning a mastership ensured a “protected place in the market,” job security, and rights that could be passed onto one’s family. Though it was not capital, mastership was a form of property that “gave form and significance to the rest of the master’s property”; it was the “capstone of his possessions and marked his place in the social order” (Sewell 118, 119). Sewell’s thesis is precisely that, far from being a throwback to a bygone era, memories of the guild system, skilled labor, and old regime understandings of privilege continued to play a powerful role in nineteenth-century revolutionary ideology, even as the circumstances shaping working-class life assumed dramatically new forms.

Though a world of difference separates old regime cobblers from twenty-first century college professors, they share the fact that both organized their labor on guild-like principles and embraced the idea of privileged work in a context in which so-called progressive reformers were intent on presenting this older model as restrictive, conservative, and self-interested. Like prerevolutionary laborers, American college professors, in their heyday, believed that they were members of a profession who were entitled by virtue of their training to certain privileges (the right to train “apprentices,” academic freedom, participation in institutional governance) and who made these privileges, more than their economic

rewards, central to their identity. This conception of privilege was firmly rooted in older ideas about labor—the notion that certain distinctive rights follow from a particular type of training and professional accomplishment—and has little to do with the meaning that privilege has acquired in later periods (i.e., status and rights resulting from racial identity or wealth). This essay has suggested some of the trends that have coalesced to undermine the professorate's professional status in recent decades. The fading appeal of the language of privilege as an idiom for justifying professor's status is a further consequence of these developments.

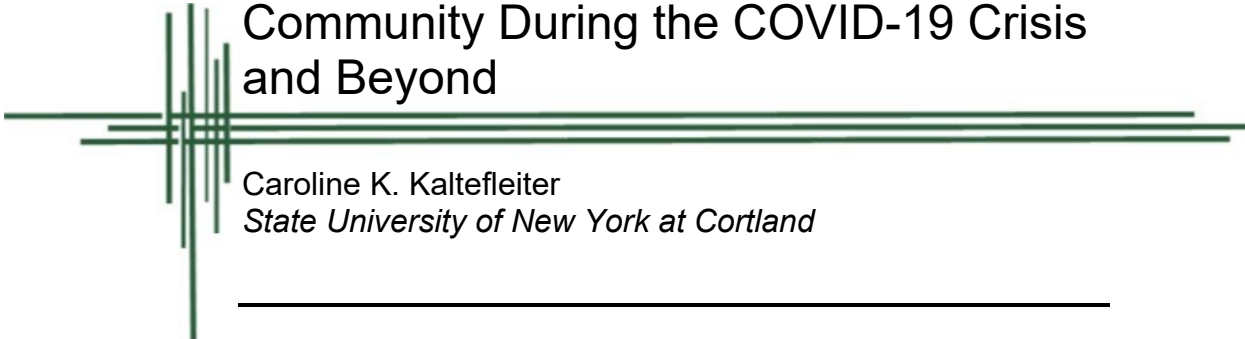
Is it possible to imagine a rekindling, on the part of faculty, of this professional rhetoric of privilege at present? The times hardly seem propitious for such discourse. The right has, at least temporarily, succeeded in establishing the entitled, agenda-setting liberal professor as a prevailing stereotype associated with higher education, and the left has done little to challenge it. Reformist ideas about “job-ready skills,” “student success,” and enrollment growth—rather than quaint concerns about faculty professional standards and quality—dominate current higher education discussions. And for contemporary progressives—to whose ranks many faculty belong—“privilege” has become the common denominator for all that is wrong with the world, making its appeal as a rallying cry very weak indeed. Yet Sewell reminds us that, in the early years of the industrial age, many allegedly progressive economic reforms were made on the backs of workers, who, for this very reason, held fast to an older model of labor organization, even as they transformed it into a modern revolutionary language that vehemently criticized exploitative labor practices and their false pretenses. There are perfectly sound reasons for believing that the American academic profession is on its way out, that it will go the way of Thompson's handloom weavers: a memorable and appealing moment in a profession's history— but, ultimately, only a moment. Yet perhaps there is a way for the academic profession, even as it is relentlessly de-professionalized by the systematic recourse to non-tenure track contracts and the centralization of decision-making in the hands of administrators, boards, and politicians, to reclaim the idiom of privilege—giving new meaning to the value and dignity of academic labor in an age intent on making it a job like any other.

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Organizing for Faculty Solidarity and Community During the COVID-19 Crisis and Beyond

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the failure of neoliberal approaches to higher education and galvanized faculty organizing and engagement. The pandemic opened up continuums of care and ways to (re)imagine crises as interstices for ongoing mutual aid not with designated beginnings and ends (e.g., the end of the pandemic or post-pandemic) but interludes of continued support and action inside and outside of the academy. Digital tools used for teaching, such as video conferencing platforms during the pandemic, would prove significant to strategies for future organizing. This article explores intersectional organizing and highlights the parallel pandemic of racial injustices and anti-racist organizing efforts in higher education after George Floyd's death. It investigates prefiguration, financialization, capitalism, alienation, and futurism in the face of university crises. A discussion of localism, utilizing auto-ethnography, historiography, and semi-structured interviews of faculty organizers situates teaching collectives and faculty unions as significant to organizing in higher education. Anarchist principles such as solidarity, direct action, and mutual aid inform this discussion. Finally, the article concludes with suggestions for creating alternative organizing spaces for academic institutions.

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Education becomes most rich and alive when it confronts the reality of moral conflict in the world.

Uncommon Sense: From the Writings of Howard Zinn (9)

The COVID-19 global pandemic is now the subject of numerous reports, scholarly articles, and books (Dorfeld; Ma; Seeley; Sharfstein and Marx; Lewis; Slavitt). For universities, the fallout of the pandemic includes operational and financial challenges, prioritizing institutional solvency and enforcing changes to the work practices and profiles of their staff. For academics, an adjustment to institutional life under COVID-19 resulted in the overwhelming majority making a transition to prolonged remote-working (Watermeyer, et al.). Faculty have endured significant work intensification, with workloads that have failed to return to pre-pandemic levels. In a *Chronicle of Higher Education* report, faculty members described themselves as overwhelmed by increasing workloads and lack of support, “working 7-day weeks and beginning their workdays at 5:00 a.m., with an October 2020 survey indicating that more than two thirds of faculty had felt ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ stressed during the previous month” (McMurtrie). A survey of over 1500 faculty by the American Council on Education listed the mental health of faculty and staff members as the third-most-pressing concern for college presidents, behind the mental health of students and their institutions’ long-term financial viability. It is within the wake of the pandemic that new questions arise as to future forward organizing both inside and outside of the academy.

Scholars rushed to write about the impact of the pandemic as transformational and for the most part negative against the neoliberal landscape of the contemporary academy (Al Miskry et al.; Jung et al.; McGrath et al.). However, few studies discuss measures taken by faculty to organize support networks, mutual aid efforts, and actions of resistance to institutional mandates such as returning to in-person teaching. In many cases, the drive to “return to normal” gave inadequate attention to the health and safety concerns of faculty and students. Media reports suggest that faculty unions that were vocal on the subject tended to prefer online options (Hartocollis; Zahneis). Early decisions to remain online (e.g., at California State University) prompted no opposition (Felson and Adamczyk). Meanwhile, vocal administrative support for returning to the classroom (e.g., Purdue University President Mitch Daniels) encountered faculty pushback (Flaherty).

New York, my home state, became ground zero for the Coronavirus with over 800 deaths a day in April 2020. As COVID-19 threatened safety nets and conventional systems were overwhelmed,

mutual aid groups emerged as a way for people to provide community care especially within the university setting. While faculty at campuses within the State University of New York (SUNY) system waited for direction and information as to institutional response to the pandemic, the United University Professions (UUP) union drafted a pledge of solidarity for campus workers, reiterating a call for transparency in decision making and a commitment to protect the vulnerable, provide resources to save jobs, and endorse shared governance.

UUP represents more than 42,000 members on 29 state-operated SUNY campuses and System Administration (Historical Overview UUP). Despite union engagement, individual campuses were often left in the dark as to detailed information regarding the pandemic and its impact on academic life. At this juncture, faculty on my own campus began organizing under an independent collective known as the Concerned Teaching Faculty (CTF). Members organized outside the domain of the university and its technological apparatuses by using independent video conferencing Zoom accounts to share the most updated information vetted through various sources on campus and also initiated a mutual aid network to address, as one colleague put it, “the reality of the situation.” As I have written elsewhere, mutual aid practices stem from long-standing traditions that cross borders, identity boundaries, time frames, and political geographies (Kaltfleiter, “Care and Crisis”). During the pandemic, relief work throughout New York, on and off campus, drew upon a century of mutual aid practices, including networks set up as far back as the abolition movement.

This article examines faculty organizing in higher education with a focus on mutual aid outreach for actions inside and outside of the academy. This essay is contextualized within the neoliberal university and investigates financialization, capitalism, prefiguration, and futurism in relation to organizing in the face of university crises exemplified by, but not limited to, the COVID-19 pandemic. The notion of crisis is articulated as various and multifaceted, expanding on work that addresses issues of austerity, worsening inequality, loss of income and benefits, and a heightened loss of social structures given neoliberal policies and economies (Bassi; Fraser; Jupp; Kirstein; Seis). Further, this article explores the parallel pandemic and crisis of racial injustice made explicit with media coverage of George Floyd’s murder. Anarchist principles such as solidarity, direct action, and mutual aid inform this discussion. I advocate for direct action and collective care for academics, as emphasized through the work of the late David Graeber, as critical turning points for future organizing in the academy. I suggest that future forward organizing extends beyond traditional university and union structures to incorporate ad hoc collaborations embedded within extended community groups. Methodologically, I utilize autoethnography, historiography, and anonymous semi-structured interviews with ten faculty organizers, among them contingent and fulltime faculty from my campus, to situate a

discussion of crises within the academy and beyond. Finally, I discuss creative actions, taking cues from the “slow movement” and suggest alternative spaces for organizing, championing values of solidarity and community.

Pandemonium: Financialization, Academic Machines, and Alienation in the Academy

The COVID-19 pandemic brought into focus the neoliberal financialization of the academy. Academics have experienced increased workloads, program cuts, and erosion of shared governance on college campuses over the last two decades. Neoliberalism’s impact on public education is “widely recognized and well-illustrated by the growing budget crises plaguing public universities and colleges, and through changing structures of academia through the US and western world” (Seis 44). These structural changes account for what David Harvey describes as the financialization of everything (33). He articulates advancements in financial instruments and activity as central to the expansion of neoliberalism. He discusses innovations in financial services that produced sophisticated global interconnections as well as new markets “based on securitization, derivatives, and manner of futures of trading” (Harvey 33).

The emphasis on “the financialization of everything” provides a framework through which to examine the assault on public education, and importantly, higher education. College administrators create markets to commodify knowledge and harvest intellectual labor, not for the common good and society but rather a knowledge economy. Academic administrators become purveyors of packaged information and 21st-century skills (Kaltfleiter, “Learning to Labor”). During the pandemic, administrators weighed a number of factors at the onset of the pandemic to move courses online so as to maintain in many cases financial solvency. Later on, decisions to reopen with mostly in-person instruction during the pandemic considered the financial health of the institution, its brand, political status, as well as social and cultural implications (Kaltfleiter, “Learning to Labor”). Administrators often failed to acknowledge the sacrifices of teaching faculty, be it risks to their health or family life, compiled by excessive work online. Conference calls ending with “stay safe everyone” by college leaders did little to reassure faculty and staff.

Faculty voiced frustration from the disconnect between policies and protocols, juxtaposed against their daily experiences that included teaching issues, research expectations, student crises, as well their own struggles in juggling responsibilities at home with many reporting experiences of Zoom fatigue from online teaching and meetings. Despite spending long hours online, I began to see the videoconferencing platform as an important and necessary resource for organizing faculty. I helped organize a collective of faculty, known as the Concerned Teaching Faculty, a relaunch of a group that formed in the mid ought’s whose

original agenda focused on shared governance at my university. The revived CTF collective met regularly on Zoom (and continues to do so) to share their experiences in response to administrative dictates involving performance reviews, assessment initiatives, curricular mandates, and public health updates.

The Concerned Teaching Faculty collective began with four members, myself included, and quickly grew to almost 100 regular participants from across the university who often logged on both for updates and to share their reflections and experiences of the pandemic, especially during lockdown months when feelings of isolation and desolation were most pronounced. And while early meetings of the CTF focused on logistics and information about pandemic protocols, it became clear that faculty logged on to see their colleagues and to get (re)connected, since restructuring and reorganization of the university over the last two decades contributed to further compartmentalization and segmentation of faculty and departments in what scholars refer to as academic silos (Redman; Anft 2017). These virtual communication exchanges allowed for comradeship to develop and created bonds of solidarity, support, and action.

Like many faculty members, I retreated to my home to teach my classes remotely for the entire academic year. While I was grateful for the opportunity to teach remotely, the change of instruction modalities added mental and physical stress, struggles that were shared by most academics. A commissioned study on faculty mental health reports,

Faculty members are experiencing high levels of stress, hopelessness, anger, and grief. They report heavy workloads and say their work-life balance has deteriorated. The pandemic has taken a significant toll on the lives of the faculty, with potentially profound implications for the future. (“On the Verge of Burnout”)

On a number of CTF Zoom calls, colleagues described physical ailments and mental fatigue. One colleague noted, “I have at least one cracked tooth as a result of stress-induced grinding. The cost of a root canal was too much, so I opted to have the tooth extracted.” Another colleague described a heightened state of vertigo after teaching all of their classes online. I, too, experienced health issues from constant stress. I was teaching three seventy-minute courses online twice a week. On alternating days, I fielded Zoom calls with students and meetings with faculty. This extended time on the computer contributed to several health issues. In March 2021, I was diagnosed with “Frozen Shoulder” from extensive hours working on the computer. The initial diagnosis set off subsequent ailments. I experienced excruciating pain and took prescription Ibuprofen which contributed to a stomach ulcer. I lamented my injuries to a colleague in the UK over Zoom. He likened the injuries to our bodies and academic selves to that of workers’ mutilated bodies caught in machines such as weaving looms

during the Industrial Age. I began to see my body and mind, and that of my colleagues, soldered to the computer as mill girls were tied to their looms. Despite a century's time difference, the impact, reaction to, and management of these technologies have parallels to the present-day issues surrounding neoliberalism and academia, one that extends beyond the pandemic and is grounded in alienation and an unconscious state of being (Kaltfleiter, "Tied to the Loom").

To further contextualize the fusion of the academic bodies with the machines of the neoliberal university and the experiences articulated by my colleagues during the pandemic, some of which continue to the present, I turn to Foucault's concept of biopower. Foucault defines biopower as the ability of institutions to employ "numerous and diverse techniques for the achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (140). He suggests that biopower incorporates a history of the present which is at the same time a thought of the future, hailing a discussion of prefiguration. Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin define prefiguration as the "deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now" (10). This definition captures the two senses in which prefigurative politics is utopian: It anticipates a future that is radically different from a "here and now" (37). This exploration extends that of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. who prefigured the effects of struggle by teaching how to act as if successes were already achieved (King). Such work requires recognition and action on part of both the individual and collective to address the impact of latent capitalism.

Foucault elaborates that capitalism "would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to the economic processes" (141). Or as George Simmel wrote, "The economic system of the world is assuredly founded upon an abstraction that is between sacrifice and gain" (3). The psychology of academic work and the privileges associated therein serve to obscure the degradation and alienation of the self. Miya Tokumitsu argues this is critical for academics whose identities are fusing their work "with a focus upon their subject and research, their students, and their status, such that they compromise their states of being and labor rights" (qtd. in Hall 5).

Today's capitalist market and the neoliberal academy is predicated on the notion that economic value is never inherent in the object itself, but instead is created through a politics of desirability, or, as Simmel suggests, that the practicality of economic value is "conferred upon an object not merely by its own desirability, but by the desirability of another object" (3). Such objectification of social relations leads to the cultivation of a false consciousness wherein workers become alienated from their own work and see their labor as merely a means to the attainment of other ends/material goods.

The illusion of the university and subsequent alienation of academics obscures how academic labor is increasingly proletarianized, and grounded in competition and performance management with outcomes that are standardized in rubrics and assessment plans. These transformations catalyze expressions of distress from those who work and study in universities. Such work points toward the sublimation and negation of the self because it identifies the ego with performance and subsequently leads to mental and physical exhaustion and, sometimes, bodily harm. Reports of overwork, mental health issues, self-harm, suicide, and academic exodus now fill Twitter posts, blogs, and articles. Kilkauer and Young discuss managerialism in the academy and its impact on faculty under the term “Academentia.” They note, “Academentia describes a state of organizational insanity in which academics no longer function as scholars.” And whilst academics, particularly during the pandemic, continued to produce research and scholarship, some faculty faced difficulties to remain productive in their research due to overwhelming responsibilities at work and home. This is particularly true for women and caregivers. Female academics saw their research fall during the pandemic due to disproportionately having to manage home schooling and other pandemic-related home issues (Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya; Walker). Crises at work and home compiled to exacerbate this sense heightened sense of academic disassociation. As Kilkauer and Young note, “Academentia downgrades what once defined the very existence of university—the academic faculty—into some kind of over-stressed semi-academic factory workers.” Thus, the shared experience of alienation between mill workers and academic laborers becomes complete.

Workload issues contribute to the alienation and degradation of the faculty. Long before the pandemic, faculty reported an increase in workload. The line between work and home morphs together as faculty spend more time “doing work rather than living life” (Taylor and Frechette). As I have written elsewhere, the strain on faculty to be productive scholars is part of the profession; however, the rise of new technologies, algorithms, and output metrics adds to the pressure to publish (Kaltfleiter, “Learning to Labor” 184). The curation of citations acts as both cultural and professional capital to be monetized by individual scholars, academic institutions, and companies like Academia.edu or ResearchGate. One untenured, early career researcher noted, “I feel like my work is constantly on review, and I am compared against all other junior faculty at my home institution and beyond. It’s like my own version of the film *The Truman Show*. I feel like I’m always on and under surveillance” (Kaltfleiter, “Learning to Labor” 185).

Thus, scholarly expectations combined with increased workloads particularly in service and committee work, heavy teaching loads, and extensive student advising continue to put pressures on faculty that impact overall job satisfaction and quality of life.

From scholarly work to online teaching, faculty bound in the digital continuum of remote work reported exhaustion, burnout, disillusion, and dissociation, rendering states of hollowed-out isolation and mechanization. Faculty stare at the computer, engaged in monotonous tasks that deplete their creativity and agency. The evisceration of intellectual work is noted as a contributing factor to suicidal thoughts and suicide among academics (Oswald). One faculty member, too young to retire, voiced the desire to “punch out” for the last time, an intertextual reference to “punching a time clock.” On the ontological academic timeline, the compulsion to overwork and succumb to managerialism is a defense mechanism against fears of proletarianization, casualization, and precarity. Thus, the acceleration of university work becomes a crisis not only for the individual academic but for the greater society, serving as a clarion call for collective care and resistance.

We Are the Faculty: From Alienation to Mutual Aid and Intersectional Organizing

Looking on the bright side of things is a euphemism used for obscuring certain realities of life, the open consideration of which might prove threatening to the status quo.

Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*.

Academia is exhausting and stressful; efficiency frameworks, assessment rubrics, and increasing publication expectations invade the body like a cancer. A circuitry of everyday alienation impacts academic faculty through narratives of productivity, excellence, impact, precarity, and casualization. To disrupt this circuitry of alienation and to advance a dialectic of care, compassion, and commitment to values of creativity and social justice, I turn to anarchism, with a focus on mutual aid and Post-Situationist anarchist thought as significant to strategies for future forward academic organizing. Drawing upon Marx’s theory of alienation, Post-Situationist anarchist thought goes beyond mere discussions of exploitation of workers. Rather, the focus is on the process of production and importantly the machines or technology and their impact on individuals in their daily lives (Kinna).

John Zerzan illuminates alienation within an anarchist framework, suggesting that Marx defined the term too narrowly as a distinct separation from the means of production—that alienation creates estrangement from one’s experiences and dislodges oneself from a natural state of being. Ruth Kinna distills this and states, “People are encouraged to think in terms of dreams but are frustrated by the impossibility of their achievement” (83). Zerzan elaborates on the essence of alienation, “People won’t even notice there’s no natural world anymore, no freedom, no fulfillment, no nothing. You just take your Prozac every day, limp along dyspeptic and neurotic, and figure that’s all there is” (80).

Zerzan's words struck me as prophetic, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when many academic colleagues found themselves lost, tangled in looms of a lost existence. Poignantly, they articulated a collective loss of the academy and estrangement from their academic selves. The notion of time becomes embedded in these discussions. As Nichole Shippen suggests, "The struggle for time is framed today not as a collective struggle against the dictates of the capitalist system, but rather as an individual and ostensibly private struggle to balance time constraints of both work and life, or work-life balance" (16). She continues, "Work-life balance is a misnomer and means of mystification that keeps individuals negotiating time under capitalism that is largely beyond the control of isolated and unorganized individuals" (16).

To make sense of these negotiations in academic life, I began to theorize about what I refer to as "compounding alienation," a reference that incorporates financialization with neoliberalism and wherein individual interest(s) and alienation compound at intervals that give way to collective action and identities. Individual experiences recounted by colleagues on numerous Zoom calls opened a continuum whereby individual struggles and stories of personal alienation and isolation morph into multifaceted crises taken on by those connected not only through technology, but also through empathy and experience to reify states of collective action. Colleagues lamented exacerbated loneliness and noted the ways in which the CTF virtual meetings helped them cope. As one colleague noted, "CTF was is an important space to gather and share—it was (continues to be) an information hub and also provided a social outlet that really helped overcome one's personal sense of isolation." Another colleague recounted making the transition to retirement and how CTF provided a space to remain connected while at the same time beginning to untether oneself from the university.

I am on the verge of retirement, and so come from a different perspective in that regard. I was already 'self-isolating' and in my mind moving on from academia. But CTF gave me a lifeline and a space to commiserate with other faculty, who have similar political positions, and a sense of humor and fairness that I so appreciate. I might add that I basically had vertigo on and off for two years...that was tough but CTF was one of the things that helped me weather through.

During the pandemic, the accessibility of video conferencing and digital platforms such as Zoom and Slack allowed CTF faculty, as well colleagues at other institutions, to break out of institutional silos and to actively participate through posting updates and information on curated channels. Digital communication provided platforms for the creation of a series of petitions that created a sense of solidarity and agency. Many of the proposals developed by the CTF would go on to be proposed through

official committees and channels on campus such as the Faculty Senate or UUP meetings with numerous CTF members logging on as presentations were made. As one colleague notes,

The petition drive on reopening for fall 2020 and the demand for transparency is an action that I recall most especially because so many people signed on to it. I think it came right at the right time and tapped into the general feelings among our colleagues that we would not have known about otherwise. It “harnessed” the collective feeling of discontent with the administration's unilateral actions.

Another colleague commented on the ways the CTF collective operating outside the university and union structure was comforting and a much-needed turn in organizing,

What stands out most is that CTF created a space for teaching faculty to not feel isolated by creating a common space to share concerns about public spaces and restrictions on IRL (In Real Life) interactions.

CTF was (is) an important means of maintaining some kind of solidarity. The memories that stand out most are the large group Zoom meetings in which so many faculty participated. It was important to me to hear many voices expressing similar concerns. It also drove home the disconnect between administrators and teaching faculty, but we were able to create petitions and common positions that I think had an impact on having our collective voice heard.

Digital organizing strategies used by CTF to disseminate information about the COVID-19 pandemic and offer support evolved from other activist groups such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter with a focus on social justice unionism and activism that centers common good demands while seeking to protect public education and build coalitions within and across social movements, thereby increasing the number and diversity of activists, unionists, and participants.

The late David Graeber deemed Occupy a mass anarchist movement. While the “We are the 99%” slogan is attributed to Graeber, his contribution to the theory and practice of Occupy and its conduct and tactics was much more profound and formative for the movement and would impact subsequent movements (Shah et al.). Members of CTF would adopt the slogan “We are the Faculty,” spoken first over Zoom and then incorporated as a hashtag. It served as a call of solidarity in response to dictates made by administrators whose work was far removed from the

everyday experience of teaching and daily interactions with students, who were under duress from the pressures of the pandemic.

My work with Occupy and exchanges with Graeber informed my engagement with the CTF. It is also shaped by involvement with the Positive Force House anarchist collective, Food Not Bombs, and the Riot Grrrl movement in Washington, D.C. As I have written elsewhere, the Positive Force House served as a meeting and organizational space for Riot Grrrl in the early 1990s. Riot Grrrl officially began in the summer of 1991 when five young women in Washington, D.C., came together to protest neighborhood gentrification, racial profiling, abortion clinic bombings and police brutality (Kaltfleiter, *Anarchy Grrrl Style Now*). The street actions in Washington, D.C., set the tone for future anarchist activities such as the World Trade Organization (W.T.O.) protests or the Summit of the Americas demonstrations, which Graeber poignantly documented in his ethnographic study *Direct Action*. David Graeber's idea of direct action suggests "The structure of one's act becomes a kind of micro-utopia, a concrete model for one's vision of a free society" (Graeber 210). Direct action accentuates the idea of prefiguration as an organizing strategy wherein faculty do not wait for direction from unions or administrations, but rather engage in actions to build better workplaces that not only address immediate needs or crises, but importantly form the foundations of the universities of the future that we embody in the present.

Educator unions and collectives such as CTF have been at the forefront working on common good issues that affect faculty, students, and professional staff both within the academy and greater society. In concert with public K-12 scholars, faculty advocated for common good demands identifying and striving to mitigate COVID-19's exacerbation of racial and class inequalities with data showing that Black and Brown communities were among those most hesitant to return to in-person instruction (Walsh). Like many colleagues at other institutions, CTF members drew upon mutual aid practices to assist quarantined students with access to meal delivery, free COVID-19 testing, computer resources, and enhanced internet for online learning. Direct action remained at the forefront of all the mutual aid work both on campus and in the community. Hence, mutual aid becomes a necessary turn for future forward academic

forefront of all the mutual aid work both on campus and in the community. Hence, mutual aid becomes a necessary turn for future forward academic organizing and greater society. Dean Spade elaborates,

Mutual aid is a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political

conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable. (“What is Mutual Aid”)

Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, in his book *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection*, underscores the relationship of human ingenuity and connectedness made visible during the pandemic from “bringing groceries to the ill and elderly, calling to check on vulnerable neighbors, and sharing local updates on local grocery store hours and vaccine availability” (xv). At my institution, those in residence drew upon their experience of organizing assemblies, workshops, food kitchens, and other forms of mutual aid practices from collectives such as *Food Not Bombs*. These collaborations led to the formulation of the two mutual aid groups: Cortland County Mutual Aid and Mutual Aid of the Finger Lakes. These groups organized mutual aid projects across county lines in Upstate New York and with colleagues at neighboring institutions such as Cornell University, Ithaca College, Binghamton University, and Syracuse University. Food cupboards built by volunteers are stationed strategically around town and in neighborhoods in greatest need. These cupboards are still in use today. People donate food as well as take items needed, creating a fluidity of a share and care network. Mutual Aid of the Finger Lakes, embracing Graeber’s notion of giving it all away, started Free Stuff Pop-Ups, giving everything away for free. Some people responded with suspicion, asking, “what’s the catch?” Our response—nothing: “Take what you like. Take what you need.” As one member of the group put it,

From the very beginning, we approached food scarcity and the pandemic from the perspective of direct action—calling on individuals or groups to use their own power and resources to combat the crisis and call for social change. We tried to underscore not relying on the State, but let’s be clear we will get the resources to the people by any means necessary.

The fluid process of academic organizing between online and offline became apparent to me one day while assisting with the installation of one of the blue food cupboards around town. I was reminded of the book *The Men’s Shed Movement*. While Barry Golding’s book focuses exclusively on men finding refuge and friendship to counter loneliness, social disconnection, and declining mental health by participating in carpentry work and shed building, the collaborative process of building food cabinets brought together faculty, students, and community members from varying backgrounds and positionalities. These everyday experiences would prove vital to address the way people’s social identities overlap and to acknowledge compounding intersectional experiences. Kimberle

Crenshaw discusses intersectionality as a means to investigate intersecting and interlocking systems of oppression.

The pandemic amplified the parallel pandemic of racism, intensified by the media coverage of the murder of George Floyd (Peters). The COVID-19 pandemic drew attention to how “parallel pandemics of anti-enforcement and white supremacy practices have harmed the country’s ability to provide for its health and safety in these sobering moments” (Peters 374). Moreover, COVID-19 caused widespread social distancing, economic anxiety, and health risks that aggravated isolation, loneliness, and stress that are common among undergraduates, and are more pervasively and deeply experienced by students of color and low-income students. George Floyd’s murder made all these worse (Leigh-Hunt et al.; Wang et al.). Hence, discussions as to what happens disproportionately to non-white bodies in general, and specifically to Black bodies, opened possibilities for new directions in organizing by elevating discussions of critical race theory, intersectionality, and collaborative support.

Mutual aid and social justice actions would become crucial in the events surrounding the death of George Floyd and charted intersectional organizing. Trust-building ventures demonstrated through the early months of the pandemic, such as working side by side to build food cupboards and deliver food, supplies, and services to area residents, brought faculty and community members together to protest the police brutality and killing of George Floyd. Across the state of New York, and in particular New York City, mass demonstrations were held nightly after the video of George Floyd’s death by members of Minneapolis Police Force went viral.

In response to this parallel crisis, members of CTF called emergency meetings to discuss intersectional collaborative action and calls for justice. In May 2020, communities across the United States, held solidarity Black Lives Matter and anti-racist marches. Faculty that I had only seen in tiny boxes on Zoom for months were now standing next to me walking down Main Street and participating in anti-racist speak-outs. People from different socio-economic classes, professions, and positionalities gathered to march for justice. I couldn’t help but think of the demonstrations that I participated in during the summer of 1991 in Washington, D.C., after the shooting of Daniel Enrique Gomez by a Metropolitan Police Officer. Area groups called for action. Unlike the 1991 protests, which turned into the Mount Pleasant Riots, most Black Lives Matter and justice for George Floyd demonstrations were peaceful.

At my university the CTF organized several two-hour anti-racist panels, via Zoom, featuring Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) faculty to help deconstruct, and situate the summer events with calls for institutional response. Importantly organizers were mindful to share the labor of these discussions and not to place the burden on BIPOC faculty. The panels focused on deliberative dialogues of prefiguration,

organizing with future forward realities, emphasizing how to (re)imagine our own campus culture by first acknowledging systematic racism in society and what we as a campus could do to counter these injustices. CTF organizers in the summer 2020 wrote proposals and called for an anti-racist task force to be constituted on campus. Today, there remain four working groups committed to anti-racist teaching and social justice projects.

The anti-racist task force groups, along with members of CTF would be called upon again as news broke of another act of police brutality. Tyre Nichols, a 29-year-old African American man, was brutally beaten to death by members of the Memphis Police Department on January 7, 2023. Cities nationwide braced for protests after body camera footage was released three weeks later showing Memphis officers beating Nichols, who died of his injuries three days after the attack. Protests in Memphis, New York City, Los Angeles and Portland, Oregon, were scattered and non-violent (Heyward). While many colleges universities issued statements on the death of Tyre Nichols, the script is all too familiar and merely updated with a new name and information, concluding with condolences and offerings of support and counseling available to faculty, students, and staff. Some faculty criticized administrative machinations of what one colleague called “contrived compassion” pointing to once again a pronouncement of a tragedy as noted in one statement from a neighboring SUNY campus,

This incident, like too many others that came before it, fills us with anger, sadness, frustration, and grief. Violence like this is impossible to comprehend and takes a toll on all of us, but it’s crucial to remember that members of the Black Community too often experience such fear, pain, and trauma. Its impact is being felt across the country and on our campus (“Statement Regarding Tyre Nichols”).

Locally, CTF members met to discuss university responses. Early discussions revealed emotions of anger, sadness, and dejection that another young man Black man had lost his life due to police brutality. One colleague noted,

When is this going to end? We can talk about systemic racism and oppression, but until there is true social, cultural, political, and economic change. I just see us going back into the repeat cycle—waiting for the next tragedy to unfold. And I’m not okay with that. So, I propose a teach-in or walk-out to acknowledge the brutal killing of Nichols. We can’t just go back into the classroom and carry on as if this is totally normal. It’s not. So, it’s time to level up intersectional organizing. Right here. Right Now.

The Nichols case (re)affirmed faculty commitment to social justice organizing work that extends beyond the academy. Subsequent actions are planned with details to occupy public spaces to create in the words of Martin Luther King Jr, “beloved communities.” And as Angela Davis reminds us,

Social realities that may have appeared inalterable, impenetrable, came to be viewed as malleable and transformable; and people learned how to imagine what it might mean to live in a world that was not so exclusively governed by the principle of white supremacy. (67)

Building upon Davis’ work, social justice unions and teaching collectives such as CTF seek to prefigure a society to advance common good issues while working to dismantle oppression and alienation. The pandemic brought these issues into focus when many academic colleagues found themselves lost, tangled in looms of existence, and estranged from their academic selves. Anarchist principles such as direct action, solidarity, mutual aid, and prefiguration offer paths forward to connect individual experiences to collective action, linking struggles within the academy to large social movements. In short, the day-to-day practice of academic organizing becomes a matter of prefiguring a society in which one wants to live, and to create the next layer of resistance and action locally and globally.

Slow Down, Collective Self-Care, and Future Forward Organizing in the Academy

The conviviality of thinking together protects us from the damage caused by the fast life.

Carlo Petrini, *Slow Food Nation*

As we consider synergistic modes of building alternative futures and organizing in a Post-COVID academy, we might immediately think of individual and collective work stoppages, strikes, or slowdowns like textile mill strikes of the past. In fact, strike actions are now pervasive across United States and in the United Kingdom, where the University and College Union (UCU) announced 14 strike days in February and March of 2023 (Clarke et al.). However, such actions must go beyond traditional union organizing. Here, the literature of the *Slow Movement* and activism of collective self-care confront the temporal modality of speed and acceleration in the academy. The notion of “slow scholarship” has been advocated as a valuable alternative to the logic governing academic life (Mountz et al.). In the time between publication targets, teaching courses, and promotion appeals, one might find ways to occupy spaces differently within the neoliberal academy and advocate to go slow or at one’s own pace rather than sanctioned deadlines and assessment rubrics.

Furthermore, slow philosophy should not be interpreted, as Petrini reminds us, as “the contrast...between slowness and speed—slow versus fast—but rather between attention and distraction; slowness in fact is not so much a question of duration as of an ability to distinguish and evaluate with the propensity to cultivate pleasure, knowledge, and quality” (183). To that end, distractedness and fragmentation characterize academic life. Slow ideas “restore a sense of community and conviviality with friendship and joining of forces” (Berg and Seeber 90).

The philosophy of the *Slow Movement* offers a foundation of future forward organizing in the academy. The joining of forces, as demonstrated with the work of the Concerned Teaching Faculty collective, allows for the creation of intersectional spaces of resistance and organizing, offering opportunities between groups, or academic units, perhaps once pitted against one another, to find common ground and to support one another, especially during crises. David Graeber understood that crises intensify the antagonism between institutions and workers, especially during disasters, and may force otherwise opposing sides to work together, advancing a micro-utopia to supersede efforts by the State, advancing a framework of collective. For instance, during Hurricane Sandy, the New York National Guard relied on the help of Occupy Sandy to distribute supplies in the face of government failure. Occupy Sandy would not have existed had it not been for those of us who came to Occupy Wall Street the previous year, thereby creating a framework for future organizing, which later included Black Lives Matter demonstrations, and grassroots efforts to provide pandemic relief. In this way, Graeber’s notion of collective care is a constant process or continuum through which participants engage in a diversity of tactics. The practice of sorting through conflicts, conditions, and visions is to become part of a larger project, one grounded in creativity, reciprocity, direct action, and care.

An ethics of care reminds us to take care of the self and each other. During the pandemic, faculty at my institution who may have been odds with one another due to administrative roles, committee assignments, or work within the union or the faculty senate came together to create spaces for collective self-care. On her blog, *Feminist Killjoys*, Sarah Ahmed decrees self-care as warfare on the neoliberal academy. She suggests that in directing our care towards ourselves and intersectional spaces, relationships, and identities, we are (re)directing care away from “ideological objects/subjects and institutions.” This redirection focuses on the “ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves and looking after each other” (Ahmed). Faculty pronouncements of collective self-care resist neoliberal individualism by shifting burdens from individuals to collectives and finding ways to work cooperatively. Such actions incorporate a scale of self-care, collective support, and resistance to present a framework for future organizing.

While images of picket lines and solidarity marches dominate the media landscape of global academic industrial actions, future forward

organizing incorporates collective care where in this sense, care refers to a “relational set of discourses and practices between people, environments, and objects that champions empathy, sympathy, reciprocity, and fellow feeling” (Hobart and Kneese 2). I concur with Hobart and Kneese who theorize care as

an affective connective tissue between an inner self and an outer world, care constitutes a feeling with, rather than a feeling for, others. When mobilized, it offers visceral, material, and emotional heft to acts of preservation that span a breadth of localities: selves, communities, and social worlds. (Hobart and Kneese 2)

The weekly CTF Zoom meetings with colleagues serve as a digital interval of resistance and affective connective tissue where colleagues support one another and advance mutual aid and direct-action projects such as food distributions, public health information, and medical leave donations. In my analysis of the CTF Zoom meetings, I found a duality in the use of video conferencing technology; on the one hand faculty reported experiencing Zoom gloom, and yet on the other, faculty found these meetings exciting and supportive. One colleague reported,

I have to be honest—after teaching all day online, the last thing I wanted to do was to jump on a Zoom call, but I really looked forward to it. I liked how people were encouraged to grab their favorite beverage—it felt like we could have been sitting at the coffee shop or the pub. I felt a greater connection to my colleagues during those virtual meetings than in real life. I am grateful for being able to share that time together, and to see the care and support offered.

Another colleague noted, “CTF is a place where ALL teaching faculty are welcome. It’s a safe space to vent and strategize.” The participatory method of people cueing (stacking) in the chat, allowed for non-hierarchical decision making and communication. These digital conversations allowed colleagues to recount their own daily struggles and needs. As one of the members who helped organize these virtual meetings, I felt a responsibility to be there each week with my camera on and help navigate information and moderate discussions. At the end of meetings, after most colleagues had logged off—there were always a few people who were still on—looking into the camera as if to transgress the screen to sit and share space for just a little bit longer and not allow the connection to be broken or their voices muted. One colleague noted, “I think CTF gives great support to particular members of the faculty who really put themselves out there to speak out for what is just and fair.” I realized in these moments that as Ahmed suggests, “Talking about personal feelings is about deflecting attention from institutional structures.” As I witnessed during the

pandemic, new modes of thinking about organizing beyond the academy became clear. Through these exchanges of information and accounts of everyday life, we struggle collectively with economic crises, academic instability, as well as gun violence and police brutality in our communities, and recount “histories that hurt, histories that get to the bone, how we are affected by what we come up against, is one way of deflecting attention from societal structures and gives way for greater system change and agency” (Ahmed).

CTF members acknowledged that organizing beyond the pandemic entails succession planning and building a stronger sense of community by incorporating the presence of online interactions to more formalized structures on campus. A proposal for a “Common Hour” was sent to the Faculty Senate at SUNY Cortland, only to be sent back for multiple revisions and now faces the possibility of being voted down. Nonetheless, faculty remain committed to building spaces for collective actions and support which entail revelatory moments and underscore intervals of possibilities. As Ahmed notes “even if it’s system change we need, that we fight for, when the system does not change, when the walls come up, those hardenings of history into physical barriers in the present, you have to manage; to cope.” In all, collective self-care becomes a coping mechanism and tool for organizing through which a set of acts, ideologies and strategies offer possibilities for living through uncertain times.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presents opportunities to rethink traditional modes of organizing, and to amplify connective relationships not only within the academy, but also to local communities and greater society, accentuated by creating ad hoc collectives operating outside institutional structures, including existing unions. During the pandemic, digital technology created not only new spaces for organizing, but also sharing teaching experiences, linking faculty at institutions globally. Facebook groups like “Pandemic Pedagogy” emerged and mushroomed to more than 32,000 self-identified higher education faculty swapping tips and sharing reports of their own experiences with the pandemonium (Schwartzman). The *Teacher Self-Care* podcast expanded its audience during the pandemic. The host interviews teachers on the front line who discuss their struggles and how they take of their mental and physical health. The program also features interviews with educational and mental health professionals to discuss what teachers can do to prioritize their health and wellbeing (Krueger). And importantly, digital technology amplified the realities of police brutality, marking the parallel pandemic of systemic racism. If these traumas teach us nothing else, they reveal that higher education is *not* separate from the world. COVID-19 robbed us of our familiar classrooms and academic experiences, but it also plunged all of

us into situations that provide rich, trans-disciplinary opportunities for critical analysis, integrative learning, and organizing.

In this article, I explored possibilities for future academic organizing that infuse an ethics of care in everyday life, given the financialization and neoliberalism of the academy. Care in this capacity is not merely the responsibility of transcendent or reflexive subjects. Informed by a philosophy of *slow*, care cultivates emotional and intellectual resilience to the effects of the corporatization of higher education and is woven through our academic work and life experiences.

Faculty experiences of estrangement and alienation allow for interconnected fronts of resistance to open up new spaces for organizing that illuminate transfers of care from digital to “in real life” experiences. These actions go beyond awareness-raising and enable the need for transnational networks of solidarity, re-organization, and reimagination. Hence, new methods for resistance, developed collectively, frame intersectional understandings of systematic oppressions and compounding alienation.

As I have argued throughout this essay, anarchist principles such as prefiguration, solidarity, direct action, and mutual aid frame next turns for future forward organizing in the academy. Mutual aid becomes part of a continuum in organizing and is necessary to mobilize large numbers of people to build infrastructures for survival that matter now and “will matter more in coming disasters and breakdowns... Engaging in mutual aid projects teaches us essential skills that are denied in white patriarchal capitalism, such as collaboration, feedback, and participatory decision making” (Hobart and Kneese 13). To that end, I suggest that future organizing requires academics to not only question authority but also look for creative means of resistance that offer a framework for continued direct action and radical collective care. Hobart and Kneese call upon us to consider that radical care is built on praxis and note that as “the traditionally undervalued labor of caring becomes recognized as a key element of individual and community resilience, radical care provides a roadmap for alternatives” (13).

Throughout this work, I have (re)engaged with the work of the late David Graeber who, throughout his academic career, championed radical care and creative resistance as central to organizing. His work continues to inform my teaching, research, and community outreach, and exemplifies radical praxis. One year after he passed away, the pandemic was still raging, and like many faculty, I was uncomfortable returning to teaching in person. At my institution, despite vaccinations and testing procedures, faculty remained concerned about adequate ventilation in classrooms. A solution came to me as I watched a video of David Graeber holding classes outside during a round of university strikes at University College London (“David Graeber and David Wengrow Teach-Out”). I told my students, “We are channeling David Graeber” as we set up a “teaching space” outside on campus. My students brought camping chairs and we

circled up for discussions. We met regularly outside through late October until the cold and snowy weather in Upstate New York forced us inside. The students' energy reminded me of the early days of Occupy at Zuccotti Park. They go about making the space their own, playing music before class and using the human microphone to amplify announcements, directions, discussions, and observations, all the while discussing Graeber's *Direct Action* and Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*. These classroom discussions set forth a creative landscape to navigate new infrastructures and organizations, renew class consciousness, and learn organizing skills for subsequent social movements.

Future studies might further explore academic collectives, situating positionalities in relation to creating intersectional spaces constituted by volunteerism, mutual aid, and direct action that extend from universities to greater society. These actions are part of the tapestry that perhaps Graeber left unfinished, full of possibilities; as Thomas Gokey writes, "It's up to all of us to make the world we want to live in together, and it is going to take all of our love and creativity to win" (qtd. in Shah et al.).

In all, future organizing incorporates a politics of prefiguration to understand who we are as academics, where we have been, our present needs, and, importantly, what we might become. We must exert collective self-care as a radical act and create continuums of resistance to disentangle our human fibers from the neoliberal machine and free our academic minds and confined states of being, all the while teaching our students future forward organizing skills as we live through current crises and prepare for the next.

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Onboarding

Amber Moore
Simon Fraser University

Sound the elite boots made of
rosemary leather.
Onboarding leaves you
beneath
the crunching leaves, crushing tradition
gently.

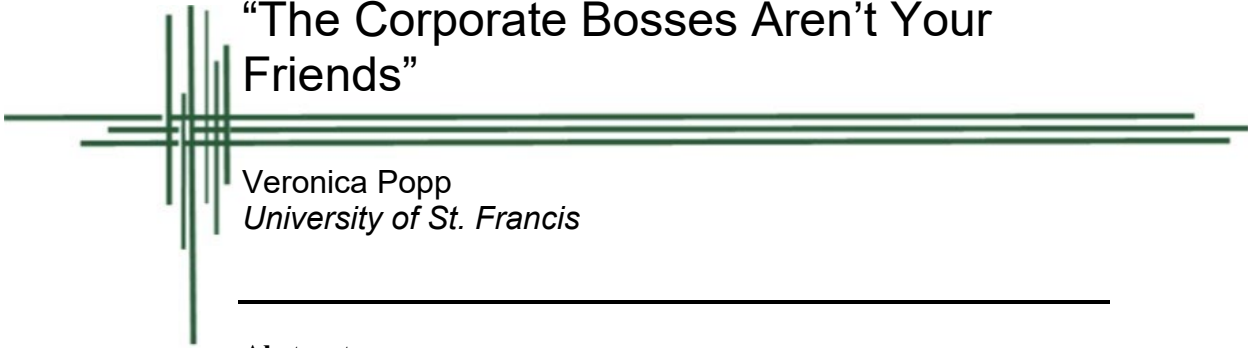
My new password didn't make it.
She was weak and had to start over
with a symbol.
She has nothing left to give,
I'm afraid.

My cursor is also flashing alarm;
the session's timing out.
I just want to sit in the rose garden
and
inhale white hybrid tea sugar moons,
exhale sessional faculty positions.

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I refresh the page too soon,
lose my work.
This portal is pedagogical,
whispering warnings and workplace safety
but I am already learned in
this place
housed |between borders| we're told are
stronger
than the roles we keep warm.

This is to say:
let me light a fire here,
cowards.



The Organizing Drive of Student Employee Library Workers at UChicago: “The Corporate Bosses Aren’t Your Friends”

Veronica Popp
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Abstract

Under our existing legislative framework, the University of Chicago was the first group of undergraduates to seek collective bargaining rights, but they will not be the last. Examining and demonstrating how their actions connect to the movement thus far is crucial. Undergraduate labor activism, however, is a form of labor activism within the academy that has received relatively little attention. It is critical to comprehend how and why this attempt to organize by some of the academy's least visible employees occurs, how it succeeds or fails, and what it means for comprehending the contemporary US private institution. This article closely reads the National Labor Relations Board case documents, collective bargaining agreement, and messaging strategies that the union and the university utilized in their case. It also comments on the national effort of undergraduate unionization as a move towards a markedly different future of higher education. As this work shows, student employees are seeking more than economic advancements and occupational rights over their schedule. Their wider goal is to create an inborn campus culture by changing the system itself.

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constituencies at DePaul University, University of Chicago, and Northwestern University, and for Service Employees International (SEIU) at O'Hare airport kicking ass for the working class.

University of Chicago (UChicago) library employees, full of the spirit of May, filed for their union election at the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) on May 8, 2017 (Illinois State, Court of Appeals, 2019). They chose an established urban union, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), Healthcare, Professional, Technical, Office, Warehouse, and Mail Order Employees Local 743, as their collective bargaining representative. IBT 743 has a membership of over ten thousand, encompassing both Illinois and Indiana, with access to member resources, and legal and local community support. The Teamsters were chosen specifically because they already had an in-born culture of unionization both in Chicago and on campus, due to their representation of the other campus library staff.¹ They also had a history of long fights with large corporate entities, such as Montgomery Ward in the 1950s, which solidified their status in Chicago as both bread-and-butter unionism and social unionism.²

UChicago was the first, but will not be the last, group of undergraduates to seek collective bargaining rights under our current legal system and it is important and necessary to explore and show how their efforts relate to the movement so far. Discussion of labor organizing and collective bargaining issues at universities almost always centers around graduate employees,³ contingent faculty,⁴ or tenured public university faculty, and relatively little research is focused on another form of labor activism within the academy: the undergraduate. Considering this move among some of the academy's least visible workers to organize, it is important to understand how that organizing happens and why, how it succeeds or fails, and what it means for understanding the modern US private university. This case study of the University of Chicago Library organizing drive can provide an important lens through which to view these movements.

This essay is not a history of university collective bargaining, higher education, or faculty opposition to unionization. This work is an examination of one unionization effort at a specific time and place. While a participant in the graduate employee activism movement at UChicago as a union organizer in 2017, I observed a parallel undergraduate movement occurring simultaneously on campus and was afforded an opportunity to see their campaign firsthand. I was able to investigate the intellectual approaches of these groups as a research opportunity thanks to my presence on campus as an observer. Further clarity was offered by the time and spatial separation between me, Chicago, and organizing efforts. Following more research, I discovered that what was happening among

the undergraduates at Chicago was remarkable and set out to record the private undergraduate labor unionization movement as an academic trend.

This paper will examine the case of UChicago students' employee unionization effort through three key phases: the university challenge of the legal status of student employees from petition to election, the university loss after an extended court battle post-election to state challenge, and union recognition and contract ratification despite a small bargaining unit and low voter turnout. This article closely reads the NLRB case documents, collective bargaining agreement, and messaging strategies that the union and the university utilized in their case and comments on the national effort of undergraduate unionization as a move towards a markedly different future of higher education. As this work shows, student employees are seeking more than economic advancements and occupational rights over their schedule, the wider goal is to create an inborn campus culture. Daniel Julius and Nicholas DiGiovanni contend that the primary motivation for faculty organizing is the desire to engage in collective bargaining over their craft rights without the usual concern over higher wages (141;174). Faculty at universities unionize to seek to maintain control over and protection of their status, employment, and position of privilege relative to other workers. Undoubtedly, every institution has its own unique culture. However, private undergraduate labor unions are a relevant and important site of discourse and analysis because, in contrast to the craft union concept, the students who work on campus are aligning themselves with campus workers and not the faculty. The values inherent in aligning with campus workers rather than campus faculty are not just a platform for collective bargaining, it is for a greater voice in the decision that affects their lives and the desire to create a more equitable and just campus environment.

Theoretical Framework / Research Question

In 2017, undergraduate students at the University of Chicago organized a campaign to unionize campus workers and formed the UChicago Student Library Employee Union (SLEU), which voted overwhelmingly to unionize in an NLRB (National Labor Relations Board) election and later ratified the first contract in 2022. Using UChicago as an example, this paper will explore why it took five years for contract ratification and three years for the university to acknowledge the union and what it means within the context of higher education organizing. UChicago is the chosen case because it represents a point where trends can be discerned when considered in context to prior efforts at George Washington University (2016-2017), Grinnell College (2016-ongoing), and prior legal precedents like Columbia. Lastly, to examine the changing face of higher education, this essay will be assessing the collective bargaining process through the lens of Nicholas DiGiovanni's five major influences on collective bargaining, which are history, expectation, people, timing, and catharsis.

I have framed this paper around the following questions: Why did University of Chicago undergraduate library workers choose to unionize? What prevented them from reaching an agreement with the university? What tactics did the university and union use to prove their case? Key themes emerge as a takeaway from this unionization effort: the ideological refusal of elite universities to acknowledge their on-campus workers as employees, the legal flip-flopping and decision making in relationship to controlling political parties both Democratic and Republican, and the refusal of undergraduates to back down, despite their being little change in personal circumstances and return on their investment in the union effort. Undergraduates are labor organizing for a variety of reasons, including to gain better wages, improved working conditions, and greater job security. Teamsters 743, with their history in both worker and civil rights organizing, initially chose UChicago clerical workers for representation due to the large number of women and workers of color who received lower than average wages for the same work as white men. Later, Teamsters 743 organized the library staff at UChicago, and sought to extend their reach to student library employees and unionize a new membership who sought representation. University of Chicago undergraduate students held an already existing culture and history of social justice and were able to achieve collective bargaining despite other larger national union efforts having failed. Other student groups are catching up to them, tying their already established communal activist links to unionization efforts and beginning campus conversations on the value of labor in the academy. UChicago is a place where the ideological challenges of both students and universities reached their zenith. Both refused to budge due to their previously-stated moral stances on their identities and roles within the system of higher education. The result was a five-year stalemate before the two sides could arrive at a negotiated collective bargaining agreement, a timeline well in excess of the norm. The collective bargaining agreement likely would have been achieved more quickly if undergraduate workers had not occupied an unclear legal space at the time.

Methodology and Case Selection

Undergraduate students believe they are employees when they work on campus. Universities believe that undergraduate workers' relationship to the institution is that of students, which they've argued precludes an employer/employee relationship. Private universities such as the University of Chicago argue they are not bound by the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which guarantees collective bargaining, in order to deny or prevent undergraduate workers from organizing their union. The denial is partially due to timing and political shifting within the NLRA between Democrat and Republican parties. Historically, elite universities such as the University of Chicago do not seek to give up their authority or decision-making power. Furthermore, as previously stated, ideological

opposition is a key motivator to the University of Chicago's rejection of the undergraduate unionization bid.

Identity is a major component here, as students do not see themselves as part of a gentry elite academic of yore but as belonging to the sizar. A sizar was a rare student of intellect who was a servant-class worker achieving higher education through an exchange of tuition and housing for on-campus domestic service ("Sizar"). As previously established, the university and students were at odds due to how each group identified themselves and their roles within higher education. In the past, students were overwhelmingly tools of the system, actively participating and seeking to join it. And while UChicago students, as a whole, enjoy a great deal of privilege, they nonetheless, like the privileged Berkeley students who spearheaded the demonstrations against racial injustice and the draft in the 1960s, fought for what they believed was right. Students' identification as marginalized workers is unique, with these students having the time and resources to organize and engage in the kinds of battles for incremental change that other marginalized people cannot.

In general, private enterprises do not support unionization due to the perceived loss of autonomy. Furthermore, as Valdemar Carlson argues in "Intellectuals and the Labor Movement," collective bargaining and unionization creates disruptions and challenges business management systems (456). UChicago has over 30,000 students applying every year, with a 7% acceptance rate, and holds an endowment of eleven billion dollars of investments (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Finance). They do not align their values with unions, due to the institutional focus on the maintenance of free market economics with little outside intervention. In total, the university took five years to bargain with their student employees and the majority of them had graduated before any significant gains or momentum were made within their organization. In many ways, these employees built something they would never get to see or personally benefit from.

Background

The NLRB's stance on private university organizing has evolved, but it currently operates under the 2016 *Columbia* decision.⁵ This ruling stipulates that the bargaining unit of teaching assistants were statutory employees specifically under Section 2(3) of the NLRA. Included in this ruling were graduates and undergraduates. *Columbia* stated the logic for grouping this bargaining unit of disparate ages and interests was simple: they still were the same community of interest (18), separation would frustrate the collective bargaining process, and despite temporality, the positions were recurring (21). The NLRA states an employee is broadly classified as one who performs work under supervision for which they received compensation:

The term “employee” shall include any employee, and shall not be limited to the employees of a particular employer, unless the Act [this subchapter] explicitly states otherwise, and shall include any individual whose work has ceased as a consequence of, or in connection with, any current labor dispute or because of any unfair labor practice, and who has not obtained any other regular and substantially equivalent employment, but shall not include any individual employed as an agricultural laborer, or in the domestic service of any family or person at his home, or any individual employed by his parent or spouse, or any individual having the status of an independent contractor, or any individual employed as a supervisor, or any individual employed by an employer subject to the Railway Labor Act [45 U.S.C. § 151 et seq.], as amended from time to time, or by any other person who is not an employer as herein defined. (NLRA, 1935)

Columbia ushered in the legalization of undergraduate employees to unionize by striking down the core argument that because the university had an educational mission, relative to those individuals, it could not also be their employer. According to *Columbia*, collective bargaining was permitted for student employees to promote commerce and their dual existences did not cancel each other out: “Statutory coverage is permitted by virtue of an employment relationship; it is not foreclosed by the existence of some other, additional relationship that the Act does not reach” (2). *Columbia* further clarified that departmental divisions were not prohibitive of seeking collective bargaining and the employee titles of undergraduates included teaching assistant, fellow, preceptor, course assistant, reader, and grader all qualified under the same bargaining unit (22). What this means in respect to the University of Chicago case study, is that despite the place in their education or employment, undergraduates were able to file for collective bargaining while undergoing their studies at the same university, even if their positions were unrelated to their degree.

The *George Washington* (2017) case verified *Columbia’s* stance as a legal precedent.⁶ With a unit of roughly 110 resident assistants, George Washington student employees went public and filed for unionization in 2016 in response to the *Columbia* decision with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Local 500. Their argument was that by being paid for their work, receiving the necessary training, and having duties under their employers' control, they satisfied *Columbia's* requirements for employees (“Decision and Course of the Election” 2). However, the university argued that they were students, and therefore could not also be employees under the NLRA. The NLRB ultimately concurred with the undergraduate workers, deciding that resident assistants (RAs) were employees because they were paid a salary and given housing (“Decision and Direction of the Election” 8). Overall, the

decision was made because RAs both sell and trade their labor for payment and sign a contract (“Decision and Direction of Election” 6). The university argument that RA’s could not unionize due to student privacy related to Family Rights and Educational Privacy Act (FERPA)⁷ and their argument that the workers' on-call status made them ineligible were also rejected (“Decision and Direction of Election” 2). Timing, in this case, was not on their side though. Local 500 chose to pull the petition when support dipped during final exams. They informed the members via email and they were unable to mobilize further. National union efforts have more to lose when they engage with student-employee unionization, which is why they tend to pull out of elections when they see support or political advantageousness dipping. A large union institution can remove and withhold power from its members as much as a university can when they deem it expedient. Despite the low turnout, SLEU pushed forward and held their election during finals. Campaigns that hold a nexus within worker control give them more endurance to see the course and allow them to take direct ownership of the campaign, such as in the case study of the University of Chicago.

The first private undergraduate student employee unionization effort occurred at Grinnell College. The College Trustees agreed to voluntarily recognize a unit of student dining workers in 2016, this movement was mainly run by Sam Xu and Cory McCartan with the help of pro-bono attorneys (“Grinnell NLRB Hearing Transcript”). Eventually, when the union sought to expand in a wall-to-wall election, they had to pull their petitions from the NLRB due to timing and the desire to preserve *Columbia* as precedent in 2018 (“Grinnell NLRB Hearing Transcript”). Independent efforts at Grinnell College through the Union of Grinnell Student Dining Workers (UGSDW) continued with legal protections extended to dining workers (including high school students) and community advisors, but the union was open to all with a current membership of approximately 650 students (“UGSDW”). Examining the trend over time, Grinnell lost their continued bid for wall-to-wall unionization at the NLRB in 2018. Yet, despite four years and many students graduating, UGSDW is currently bargaining for all student employment positions. UGSDW organized the first neutrality agreement in March 2022 and the college trustees voluntarily recognized their unit in August 2022. UGSGW successfully argued to the university that their organization had staying power (“Notice of Voluntary Recognition”). Meanwhile, UChicago was the first and only petition that came through in time to be certified before the NLRB changed hands in 2017 from Democratic to Republican for undergraduate employees during Donald Trump’s presidency. What Grinnell’s history showcases with respect to the case study is an example of a movement that caught fire, was extinguished due to timing and lack of communal support, yet has been reignited and reinvigorated to become a harbinger of future events at the university.

The definition of employee for students at private universities has always been amorphous, but three major decisions underpin the case study at UChicago. *New York* (2000) allowed the right to collectively bargain as employees to graduate employee teaching assistants.⁸ *Brown* (2004) ruled that student employees had a primarily educational and not economic relationship with their employer (486).⁹ *Columbia* (2016) both restored and extended employee rights to both graduate and undergraduate employees. The new change of circumstances for undergraduate employees follows the *Black's Law* definition of an employee as “A person in the service of another under any contract of hire, express or implied, oral or written, where the employer has the power or right to control and direct the employee in the material details of how the work is to be performed” (Black 525). Before this decision, undergraduates organized outside of legal spaces and often within student organizations, due to their status as non-collective bargaining employees. While the ideological opposition to unions may seem uniquely appropriate to UChicago's free market mindset, it is not much different from how we see other private institutions acting historically within the legal casefiles.

The shift in the NLRB case rulings began in favor of student employees over universities due to their financial impact on the communities they serve. Originally citing their lack of jurisdiction over private undergraduate unionization in *Columbia Trustees* in 1951, the NLRB reversed course. In 1970, the NLRB ruled in *Cornell* that due to the dual educational and fiscal status of non-profit universities, they held jurisdiction. *Adelphi* (1972) was the first time the NLRB chose to hold and exercise jurisdiction over private labor of student employees.¹⁰ *Adelphi* (1972) ruled the student employees who took on faculty duties were still primarily students (640). *San Francisco Art Institute* (1976) ruled that student janitors were temporary and did not merit collective bargaining due to turnover, temporary status, and work unrelated to their degrees (1251). *Boston Medical Center* (1999) ruled that medical interns, including residents, fellows, and house staff, had the opportunity to collectively bargain because Section 2(3) of the NLRA spoke to “any employee” (160).¹¹ This ruling overturned the previous *St. Clare's Hospital* (1977) and *Cedars-Sinai Medical Center* (1976). What each case means is that any employee who works for a private institution and trades their labor for payment has the right to unionize. Despite the fleeting status of education and employment for students, they held the same opportunity for collective bargaining. UChicago has held and maintained a role within the economic status of the Hyde Park community and it is now impossible to ignore.

Similar to UChicago, Yale University has a reputation for massive endowment, low pay, and a distaste of labor relations. The Yale office workers tried to organize five times over thirty-two years (Brecher 266). Yale's women and office workers of color famously walked off the job to counter the culture of disrespect that administrators and professors had for

their clerical jobs with student support in 1985 (Ladd-Taylor 478-479). The controversial efforts by teaching assistant graduate employees through UNITE-HERE to gain the union recognition of administration have been a twenty-year-long struggle through a partial grading strike in 1995 (Discenna 19), a solidarity strike with janitorial and office workers in 2003 (Greenhouse), and hunger strike in 2017 (Hogler 49). Yale graduate employees recently unionized and are currently bargaining with their employer.

The UChicago library unionization movement has been an ongoing site of struggle for fifty years. According to Steve Askin, “The Union is Us” a former library worker, the clerical workers union organizing efforts began due to low pay, high turnover, and lack of control in working conditions in 1950 and 1971, respectively.¹² Both library staff and student workers joined together in an organizing committee and on March 15, 1971, the library and clerical staff filed for an election with the Distributive Workers of America (DWA) naming themselves Local 103 (University of Chicago Library, 205 N.L.R.B. 220). Post-hearing the NLRB separated the communities of interest of library and clerical workers of Local in 1973 and argued they had to file one big unit of all clerical workers. Therefore, both staff and students at the library sought to align together but were separated by the NLRB, never gaining the same momentum. In 1977, clerical workers chose Teamsters Local 747, banking on their reputation for toughness resulting in a narrow win.¹³ Like the library workers currently, the first contract took two years to bargain with a salary gain of 26% (Askin). The purpose of this discussion is to provide necessary context regarding the history of UChicago library workers who sought control over their working conditions. Over time, they learned that for the university to hear their voice they had to act swiftly in utilizing the legal systems available to them.

University Challenge

Phase One: Petition to Election

UChicago’s Student Library Employee Union (SLEU) filed a petition for an election at the NLRB on May 7, 2017. This section will document, discuss, and analyze the petition to the election timeline chronicling the challenge to the legal status of student employees using the “Motion for Summary Judgement” legal brief in case 13-CA-217957 of the University of Chicago and Healthcare, Professional, Technical, Office, Warehouse, and Mail Order Teamsters Local 74. UChicago crafted its legal arguments to challenge the undergraduates’ case during a pre-election hearing on May 23, 2017, based on three core tenets of their ideology: students are not employees, the institution is educational, and the unit was not appropriate due to the dual status of graduate employees in both unions. The ideological argument is based on the limited and temporal nature of undergraduate student employment due to their status as students. If students graduate in four years, why do they need a union? This seems a

valid argument because compared to graduate student employees who generally are older and work at the university for longer periods of time, undergraduates have a less professional connection to their campus.¹⁴ On average, undergraduates are assumed to take four years to graduate. However, the national completion rate tells a different story. Nationally, students at private non-profit institutions complete their education in six years at a rate of 68% (National Center for Education Statistics). Furthermore, nationally-average workers in the United States tend to work for their current employer for four years in 2022, unmodified from the previous in 2020, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (Employee Tenure Summary). Therefore, college students may work their undergraduate jobs slightly longer than the national average. The NLRB struck down the university argument due to the status of student employees under *Columbia* and the economic status of the university and an election date was granted for June 2 and 5-8, 2017.

With an election date granted, UChicago began to engage in extra-legal processes to discourage unionization of their student employees. Prior to the election, the university sent emails on May 22-23, 2017 cautioning student employees about unionization (Appendix 1). Furthermore, on May 24, 2017, a captive audience meeting was held. The student employees, after gaining the legal right to hold an election, sought to take their methodology of seeking recognition to the campus community in keeping with the theme of UChicago's culture of social justice movements. On May 25, 2017, the March on the Boss (MOB) event sponsored by University of Chicago Graduate Students (GSU) held a space for SLEU activist Sloan Rucker to speak about the goals of the library union. She argued that the University held a separate space between themselves and their students, noting the "impenetrable wall." In lieu of university control, they sought to build and create solidarity amongst themselves. She closed her speech by reiterating the union drive held a purpose for the workers to maintain the university's mission. Increasing public awareness and pushback against corporate control and culture underpins this discussion, as Rucker closed her speech stating, "the corporate boss is not our friend." Her conclusions continue to articulate the desires underpinning all undergraduate university unionization efforts: the desire of something greater than material wealth or gains for themselves, the move to push back against the growing business model of higher education focused on results-driven values of top-down bureaucracy. The University of Chicago strategy to disarm union activists was to have employees sit on the sidelines, confuse, prevent, and depress turnout so the union could not prevail. The employee's strategy was to engage in grassroots public dialogue with their potential members at their campus community by holding meetings, having one on one conversations and participating in actions.

UChicago's second major argument cited the timeline of the election, prior to finals and its disenfranchisement of voters. The request

for an extension to Fall was denied by the board based on the same evidence presented in the pre-hearing on June 1, 2017. UChicago's attempts to delay would have meant a loss of steam and momentum, while pushing forward with an election despite the concern about turnout was the union's strategy to ensure the election happened. Typically, final examinations are the busiest time for student library employees and therefore, those who were on campus would be both working and studying. The election was held on June 2 and 5-8, 2017, with multiple polling times and stations in both the Regenstein main library, Social Service library, and D'Angelo law Library at each worksite (Exhibit 3 and Exhibit 5). The board attempted to make the voting widely accessible throughout UChicago's large campus. The voting tally was, out of 199 voters, a total of 67 for and 13 against, over 40% of the entire unit (Exhibit 5). 13 ballots were contested (Exhibit 5). Challenging ballots generally affects election results, in either direction. For example, during the 1977 clerical employee organizing campaign at UChicago, the vote count was 744 in favor for unionization with 723 against (Askin). Traditionally, many NLRB certification elections have only been decided by a small number of votes; therefore, voter turnout has a considerable impact on election outcome. Regardless of voter participation, a union must have the support of at least 50% plus one of the voting bargaining unit members in order to win a certification election. Nothing prevents a union from obtaining certification if a member of the bargaining unit does not cast a ballot in the election. In the case of SLEU, 80% of those who turned out voted in favor of unionization despite only narrowly representing 40% of the bargaining unit. A low election turnout is often a harbinger of a weak unionization movement or a strong intimidation campaign by the boss. In this case, it seems to be both. Because a significant number of members agreeing to vote yes suggests a stronger probability at winning, national unions frequently file certification elections after they have obtained authorization cards to trigger an election from the bulk of their membership (usually between 60 and 80% of the unit). Smaller units must count on each single voter. In Grinnell's case, the dining employee's turnout was similar; however, they were voluntarily recognized by their college and faced no legal hurdles. Therefore, legal challenges and small turnout meant less support during an arduous contract campaign, which resulted in UChicago student library employees extending their timeline.

There are many national and local reasons for lower voter turnout within the United States and UChicago typifies this trend. According to Henry Farber in "Union Organizing Decisions in a Deteriorating Environment," from the National Bureau of Economic Research through an analysis of 140,000 NLRB elections from 1973-2009, the cost and time in these efforts prompt unions to choose bigger bargaining units with higher chance of winning, which is leading to a decrease of turnout (26). Regarding the University of Chicago, time was obviously a likely factor. Students who live on campus have a stronger impetus to vote and

encourage others to do so. Those who do not want to vote or seek to travel home, have a less likely chance of voting in the election. Finally, if one disagrees with the unionization effort, it is often easier not to vote at all and accept the results either way. Furthermore, as discussed below, due to the quarterly status of some employees, they may be unaware of their in-unit status. It is up to the union and membership to engage them in getting out the vote. Neither union nor university choose the dates of elections, the regional director selects the time. As Faber's work indicated, national unions do not invest in small campaigns, instead investing in campaigns they seek to win by using all the tools at their disposal. Local unions have community involvement, history, and resources. The unit itself was small, which was a tactical decision to garner legal certification as soon as possible prior to the NLRB changing hands.

Before the election, employers are required to provide an "excelsior" list, the names and contact information (including address) of employees. Often the lists will be inaccurate because employers have a challenging time determining who is in and out of the unit during a specific time and they often do not put forth much effort to fix their lists. Therefore, it is up to organizers to decide and follow up with those who are "in unit." This context is particularly useful when considering the union has a personal stake in a stronger excelsior list and the employer doesn't, it is likely voter turnout will be low because voters are unaware, they are within the bargaining unit. For example, due to a bad list from the employer, the NLRB overturned Harvard University's initial election on November 16-17, 2017 and held a second election on April 18-19, 2018.¹⁵ They won recognition through the Harvard Graduate Students Union-United Automobile Workers (HGSU-UAW) after a years-long campaign. However, based on a poor messaging strategy from the UAW, they focused narrowly on graduate employees. Undergraduate employees who were teaching fellows, teaching assistants, and course assistants at Harvard were unaware that they were even members of a union. Due to the email messages, meetings, and culture of activism at UChicago, it is less likely that the student employees were unaware of the election; however, turnout was low due to the aforementioned challenges of timing and intimidation.

Phase Two: Post-Election Challenge to State Challenge

On June 15, 2017, UChicago crafted its legal arguments to challenge the undergraduates' election based on electioneering, election timing, and the temporary status of student employees. Electioneering is the manipulation of voting through engaging either in person or through signage, out or near a polling place at a specific distance (usually fifty feet). Despite the failure to speak to voters on the worksite and the university testifying that they did not see any electioneering, they still brought forth the charge, mainly due to workers who were at the library wearing union insignia (Exhibit 12). According to the union, it was not possible to tell who was voting or

who was entering the library to study or to work. The one caveat was the offer of proof for witnesses to the charge of improper electioneering, which was granted on December 15, 2017, held on February 15, 2018, and denied in April, as unfounded. The only time when UChicago used the term “employee” to refer to SLEU was to discuss that a union sign was distracting and harming the choices of the voters to have a democratic election at the polls.

This criticism by the employer is an important distinction, because student employees both study, work, and often live in proximity; therefore, the difficulty in establishing who is entering the space to vote and who is entering the space to study is paramount for university elections. Future work should examine the best on-campus location for private university elections to ensure spaces for a free and towns, the university revolves around a central hub and community, since students truly live and work in the same locations; therefore, potential alternatives should be considered hereafter. UChicago is an example of the types of legal and extra-legal tactical strategies used to prevent voter turnout and, if that fails, to prevent the union’s certification.

One of the most consistent arguments from the University of Chicago through each denial was citing the limited and temporal nature of undergraduate employment intertwined with their educational status (Exhibit 2, 4, and 6, 8, 10, 12, 15, and 18). In 2017, these points were argued on May 23, June 14, and June 24, in the “Request for Review” and were consistently denied by the Regional Director. UChicago also refused to sign the election certificate (Exhibit 3). Undergraduates on average take six years to graduate and, as with any short-term position, turnover is cited as a concern regarding training new workers. Yet, if temporality is an issue, the UChicago case study proves that undergraduate student employees want more than justice only for themselves; they seek to build a legacy of consistency at their institution. There is limited evidence of financial gain from these union efforts. Compared to the university, students have limited time and resources for a campaign. Therefore, waiting until students graduate is a viable method to prevent unionization, which is what the Trustees did at Grinnell College. Unionization efforts such as Grinnell’s struggled to maintain momentum as activists moved on. There are too many students who now seek to continue this union trend, though, and the “wait it out method” is no longer feasible. As previously discussed, the internal politics of national unions disincentivize pursuing what they may view as marginal campaigns; therefore, when choosing Teamsters 747, the student employees named themselves as owners within their process of unionization. The university and student employees spent time, money, and energy on their ideological disagreements based on what and whom they believe a university student is. These arguments were extended into the state courts and triggered by Teamsters Local 743 seeking to collectively bargain with the University of Chicago. Letters dated March 27, 2018, and April 2, 2018, requested bargaining dates, and

the university denied the claim due to the temporary status of student employees (Exhibits 14 and 15).

Phase Three: Recognition to Ratification

Both federal and state courts were major players in enforcing the University of Chicago case. UChicago was charged with refusal to recognize the union, after exhausting all the legal avenues, on December 17, 2019, and subsequently recognized the union on February 13, 2020. In 2019, after refusing to bargain for six months, the union filed an Unfair Labor Practice (ULP), a claim that states the employer violated the NLRA by interfering with employee rights by refusing to collectively bargain with a unit that won a legally certified NLRB election (section 7 & 8 (a) (1)). The failure to collectively bargain with an NLRB-certified union is a violation resulting in a charge against one of the preeminent universities which situated itself ideologically within the principles of free thinking and spirited inquiry. The NLRB served the institution with the charge on June 15, 2019, and on June 29, 2019, the institution finally admitted they were refusing to bargain in order to test *Columbia* due to the educational status of student employees. In a final effort, UChicago returned to the temporary argument in the state court by seeking to prevent collective bargaining due to *Columbia*, but not seeking to overturn *Columbia*. “University of Chicago v. National Labor Relations Board” in Seventh Circuit Appellate Court decided in favor of IBT Local 743 arguing that *Columbia* decided that even if employees are temporary, they still deserve representation (Illinois State, Court of Appeals). UChicago argued that because the workers were temporary, they could not unionize (Illinois State, Court of Appeals). The court concluded that the argument was not persuasive:

The University relies on a legal assertion that its student library employees cannot collectively bargain because they are temporary employees who do not manifest a sufficient interest in the terms and conditions of their employment. Those categorical assertions were explicitly rejected by the Board in *Columbia University*, which the University does not ask us to invalidate. The Board did not abuse its discretion in adhering to Board precedent and refusing to admit the University’s proposed evidence, which did not support the University’s position under prevailing Board law. (Illinois State, Court of Appeals)

The argument that casual workers are not employees simply adds an adjective to a case that has already been thrown out due to the standing *Columbia* precedent. However, at the same time as this decision, the NLRB published an agenda that could have wider implications for undergraduate employee organizing nationwide.

Federal Challenge

The *Columbia* precedent has been maintained and unchallenged despite legal friction; however, UChicago delayed its legal challenges to SLEU by banking on the partial reversal of *Columbia* in 2019. On September 23, 2019, John Ring, the former chair of the NLRB and a Republican appointee, published an agenda revisiting the *Columbia* judgment unilaterally for the purpose of efficacy without a case to adjudicate, which indicated that Ring was breaking with precedent (United States Government, National Archives). The aim of “Jurisdiction-Non-Employee Status of University and College Students Working in Connection with Their Studies” was to overturn the provision in *Columbia* that allowed all private university employees who worked related to their majors as non-employees, which would primarily impact graduate employees. In one of her first actions as Chair, Lauren McFerran withdrew the proposed rule change to the status of employees on March 15, 2021, due to limited resources (United States Government, National Archives). The ruling would include some student employees (who worked related to their studies) and not all (who mainly worked for economic reasons) and would thereby result in NLRB decisions returning to a case-to-case basis. Ultimately, the NLRB did not see this as a valid application of the principle. As Hogler forecasted, Trump appointees to the NLRB cause direct harm to union efforts seeking collective bargaining. The reasoning was touted as the need for efficacy. The action of overturning a ruling without a pending case, with a purposeful intention to exclude, and after it changed three times prior, does not provide consistency and steady commerce. The National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education, Hunter College failed to take a direct stance on the issue; however, they called for testimony and empirical evidence from collective bargaining contracts to the guide (Herbert and Naald). What this means in relation to the context of UChicago is that the NLRB will constantly shift between Democrat and Republican in attempts to “chip away” at precedent during any pending case. The expectation is to predict that these political shifts will continue to occur until the NLRB appointees become politically sectarian and maintain its original purpose as an independent agency.

Analysis of Union Effort and Collective Bargaining Contract

My analysis has shown the University of Chicago undergraduate library workers chose to unionize because they sought to build a legacy of consistency at their institution with an already established union, Teamsters 743. The University of Chicago argued that the ideological and educational role of students was paramount over the fiscal relationship (University of Chicago v. National Labor Relations Board 7). History, community involvement, and the resource of human capital (organizers within the bargaining unit rather than employed by the union) were methodologies the union used to both win and maintain long-standing

support. Press coverage on SLEU was limited, varying from two paragraphs in *Inside Higher Ed*, *Chicago Tribune*, write-ups in the *Maroon*, the student newspaper, and a press release from the Teamsters. Often the union movements of the graduate employees and undergraduate employees were lumped together, such as in the “Two Student Groups File for Unionization” article in *Chicago Maroon* (Lomax). Overall, SLEU maintained a low profile. Communication was through person-to-person and their social media page regarding updates on the election, captive audience meetings, anti-union messaging, events, NLRB challenges, and bargaining. Accounts and messaging maintained by members and membership (while sporadic) is a local union form for winning basic member control, in lieu of larger unions that base their success on the need to gain large numbers of members in a short time.

The close-knit relationship between Teamsters Local 743, library staff, and library student employees cannot be understated. UChicago’s culture of solidarity across employee lines has been a constant theme throughout its history since its attempt to file for an election together in the 1970s. Independent union efforts such as Grinnell and Reed attempted to contact their pre-existing on-campus janitorial service unions but were both unsuccessful (Hichens; Douglas). University of Chicago and SLEU signed a collective bargaining agreement on May 25, 2021. As the contract shows, the student library employees asked for a starting wage of \$15.30 per hour which is slightly higher than the minimum wage law of Illinois as of January 1, 2023, which calls for \$13 and \$14 by January 1, 2024 (“Collective Bargaining Contract May 25, 2021- May 25, 2024”; “Illinois Department of Labor”).¹⁶ Student library employees have a wage increase based on seniority with \$15.92 being the highest rate of pay for a long-term worker. Furthermore, they gained overtime pay, signing bonus, lead pay, solo pay, pay for an additional language, experience credit, a grievance policy, non-discrimination language, holiday and bereavement pay, and finally, layoffs based on skill and seniority (“Collective Bargaining Contract May 25, 2021- May 25, 2024”). The contract language on bonus pay, seniority, and status, echoes similar contract language the IBT 743 also utilized with Provident Hospital employees and workers, showing that UChicago library employees chose them due to a desire for similar protections. Like UChicago, Provident Hospital was a local southside institution, due to its status as the first hospital which was both African American funded and owned. The trend of blue-collar unions entering higher educational organizing in greater numbers is important to follow because, in lieu of adopting the framework of professionalism, student employees are embracing a worker identity tied to their labor.

The time to contract took five years, which is in keeping with the overall lengthy process of seeking collective bargaining through the NLRB, UChicago is another example of the continuation of a national trend. According to Kate Bronfenbrenner, Director of Labor Education Research at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor

Relations, in 2007 there were 1510 elections through the private sector NLRB and 52% failed to gain their first contracts in a year and 37% failed to achieve their first contract in two years (3, 22). Bronfenbrenner's view is that employees are not incentivized to unionize and often the techniques that employers use such as interrogation, captive audience meetings, and anti-union emails occur so often they are normalized (25). While these moves are not illegal, they do not foster a space for workplace democracy. Speeches to captive audiences and anti-union propaganda are legally permissible. Employers are within their legal rights to lie in speeches to captive audiences and send as many anti-union messages (via email or in writing) as possible. Retaliation, threats, or anti-union statements are not legally permitted less than one day before an NLRB election, however, there is little else to do except file charges at the NLRB or hold another election (Bronfenbrenner 24-25). Other methods, such as delaying or filing charges with the NLRB still take an inordinate amount of time (Bronfenbrenner 2, 3). Bronfenbrenner's other research has shown unions are weakened due to institutional antagonism and laws that are often rarely enforced (5). As Bronfenbrenner suggested above, delays are legal and anti-union messaging such as captive audiences' meetings are illegal; however, the behavior has become so normalized that it is often forgotten. In the case of the University of Chicago, the employer engaged in these extra-legal attempts to stymie the unionization efforts, which delayed the inevitability of a certified unit and collective bargaining contract.

UChicago is the first undergraduate employee unit of library workers to unionize and, due to the overwhelming trend of student employees pushing back against their universities, they will not be the last. By aligning themselves with low-wage workers and their fellow librarians, they have two lines of defense against their casualization. Elliott Kuecker argues that the University of Chicago student library workers are the first to protest their status in the low-wage economy, but by linking up with the already existing library professionals they took a stance against the casualization of their profession through the saturation of part-time and student employees rather than full-time staff (56). The solution is not to provide students with more complex professional quality work, it is to pay students a fair wage and treat them like human beings who have a say in their workplace. For example, student employees are seeking higher wages and control over their working conditions due to the increasingly restrictive cuts to full-time staff employment in lieu of less expensive part-time student employees. The solidarity and connections made between student employees and staff are important because these workers recognize their shared struggle for control over their workplace at UChicago and have maintained their collaborative desire since their initial bids in 1950s and 1970s respectively.

Labor implies production, but while UChicago students are paying for their education, many of them are running the college by maintaining its day-to-day operations. The institution works because the

students are there to both attend classes and work on campus. This offers a striking contradiction to the concept of liberal arts education: students are running the school in more ways than one. They are free to switch or change jobs or work multiple positions at once. Their roles are often in flux, but what should not be in flux is their legal title as an employee. The university depends on the labor of undergraduates, unionized or not. Mark Bousquet argues that both businesses and universities are corporate entities, and unions, while useful, do not stop the marginalization of these workers under a capitalistic system (148). Student employees are rejecting the concept that they must accept a temporary and marginalized status. Even as early as 1969, Ralph S. Brown Jr., argued that collective bargaining processes are not without their own difficulties, as sharing power and authority is not always possible at specific institutions. It is that increased distance that has grown between universities, faculty, and students that are leading to the growing divide and struggle for power. As Brown concluded, the role of the “third force” activist student is not stepping back. The activist student like faculty and university also wants power and say in the decision-making process in how they live and work. The UChicago case study is an example of what happens when an activist student group and the university choose to go toe-to-toe over their disagreement on their role at the university.

Conclusions and Projections

I conclude this essay by examining the results of the union recognition and contract campaign effort through the lens of Nicholas DiGiovanni's five major influences on collective bargaining. These are: (1) history, (2) expectation, (3) people, (4) timing, and (5) catharsis. In doing so, I forecast where the movement will go next and how UChicago both typified organizing in private universities and diverged from it. Both the institution and the students intensified their actions to achieve their desired outcome. This case study's strong point is the university's history, specifically the recognized ideological differences between UChicago and its employees. Due to their history of resistance to unionization efforts in both the economic and educational spheres, UChicago is recognized for its market-oriented perspective. Furthermore, IBT 743 had at their disposal a previous history of association with the university, localization of student and community activism, collective member engagement, and a reputation for resilience that preceded them. The expectation of library employees was to have a small unit of unionized workers, but they were aware that the university would fight them (due to the aforementioned conflicting viewpoints) every step of the way. The university made every attempt to prevent unionization by burying the union in paperwork hoping that they would choose to pull their petition due to the extended timeline and tenuous cost-benefit analysis. While the initial thrust was over pay and hours, the theme of voice continues to be repeated throughout the effort. The people within the movement were library staff and undergraduate

employees who spent their time organizing and creating a legacy of unionism at UChicago.

The timing of the certification was swift, if the University of Chicago had succeeded in delaying the union election until Fall or canceling the election, there would be no union. All private university unionization efforts were placed on hold once former President Trump's appointed NLRB chair, Ring, took office. The method to organize and file quickly with guaranteed support in a smaller union is risky. A collective bargaining agreement may not be as comprehensive as a larger more well-defined union organizing strategy of a super-majority. However, by acting fast and maintaining momentum, SLEU managed to create a union of the largest viable number of student employees in the shortest time available. To win their election and garner certification before the NLRB chairship changed hands, SLEU chose to organize with Teamsters who are known for their community approach and reputation for toughness and who did not abandon them despite the protracted legal fight. The system of adjudication was lengthy and students would not enjoy the tangible results they fought for themselves, yet continued to organize. These university techniques met the same pattern: by preventing an election or contract negotiation from occurring, the institution sought to "run out the clock" for *Columbia* to be overturned. Similarly, through emails and captive audience meetings, they sought extra-legal measures to ensure the election would result in low turnout and fought both the election process and results. Finally, the student employees filed for a union they never had the opportunity to see advance. Therefore, catharsis was never achieved.

To reiterate, UChicago is an important and valid site for case study analysis because it is an example of identity disagreements at the university when two entities both student and university refuse to back down, despite losses on both sides in terms of time, money, and energy for little reward. Like all unions, Teamsters 743 seeks new membership and union dues are not free. There is a cultural uptick of youth organizing, and a need for organizations with knowledge and experience to teach these skills. Unions require membership dues to survive, however, five years of legal support without pay is a substantial venture from any union. Therefore, Teamsters 743 invested in UChicago student employees as future members and workers. This case study and history show that over time student employees can and will unionize at whatever personal, professional, and financial cost because they want a voice on their campus and a culture of solidarity, despite heavy odds.

Unions will continue to grow among Generation Z because as the cost of living and inflation grows prohibitively higher, college continues to be an assumption rather than a privilege, and as the effects of the global continue to evolve, workers are making connections between the labor they enact through their studies and the work they undertake on campus to fund their studies. Administration, unions, and the NLRB cause direct harm to the working and living conditions of student employees when they

fail to place trust in the integrity of these movements. Denying their existence, pulling out of elections, and continuing to accept long-winded legal rigamarole do not help US universities and their students. Undergraduates are not seen as employees; however, as case analysis and precedent have indicated there is no legal justification to currently exclude them. The battle in the courts is based on ideology: universities believe students even when they work on campus are students first, despite receiving a wage and tax statement (W2) for their employed labor. Being a student, on the other hand, is no longer preparation for becoming a worker; the identities are much more fluid. Craft unionization is only part of the reasoning why undergraduate students seek to unionize in their workplaces. Yes, they want control and autonomy in their lives, but they also want an opportunity to meaningfully participate in the campus they work. The NLRB has swung back and forth regarding how to classify these workers, between recognizing them as employees worthy of workplace protections, or defining them as students, who do not enjoy the same rights under the law. The University of Chicago is an important case to analyze because undergraduate unionization is a phenomenon that is poised to accelerate, and the relative lack of academic study on the topic is a spot in labor scholarship that needs to be filled. Undergraduate labor movements interact in an ever-evolving flow as opposed to a typical linear manner characteristic of pursuing collective bargaining, by building on (or creating) a campus culture of unity.

Undergraduate organizing efforts are in keeping with the national trend which began during the COVID-19 pandemic: students refused to be exploited. Mt. Holyoke, Wesleyan University, Dartmouth, and Barnard College, all elite universities, have ongoing unionization efforts. Like UChicago, the strategy of Kenyon College is to delay rather than hold an election for their undergraduate employees, due to the example set by the student employees. *Kenyon* (2021) through Kenyon Student Workers' Organizing Committee (KSWOC), affiliated with the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) filed for their union election in October 2021 and were granted an election. However, they have been indefinitely delayed ("Motion to Postpone" 2). Like Grinnell, Kenyon's bargaining unit advocates for a wall-to-wall approach including library employees. Overwhelmingly, the recent bargaining units are either resident assistants or dining hall workers, both being groups who deliver essential services such as food or home care. More investigation is being done by the author on the relationship between resident assistants and dining hall worker undergraduate unionization movements as a growing "servant class" and what it means for the private university. Due to the emerging status of the private undergraduate labor movement, the scope of this research is purposefully constrained. The effects of private undergraduate unionization on student achievement, graduation rates, and the teacher-mentor relationship need to be studied further. The University of Chicago was the first of many universities to have students question

what their role meant at the university, sparking a five-year battle based on an ideology that continues far beyond their ivy-covered walls.

Notes

¹ The legacy of the teamster is business unionism. This type of unionization is not worker-run, it functions as a third party that exchanges dues for a worker contract and fails to advocate or activate the membership. Business unionism creates an ineffective give and take relationship based on capital. Teamsters are assumed to be criminals, associated with the pinstriped suits and cigars of the Italian American Mafia (Mob) running the crooked transportation industry and sitting on piles of members' money. But they were the most radical employees who enacted justice for themselves based on their own codes rather than following the standard letter of the law. Instead of being labeled a dead or passé organization, teamsters have a much more solid history and reputation as a well-respected organization that fights for their workers. See David Scott Witwer, *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union* (2003).

² See Liesl Miller Orenic, "The Base of the Empire: Teamsters Local 743 and Montgomery Ward," which argued the shift in Teamsters 747 included both legal and illegal channels of operation.

³ See Robert and Gary D. Rhoades in "Graduate employee unionization as symbol of and challenge to the corporatization of U.S. Research universities," which argues connections between graduate students' unionization and the corporate university is the result of the inherent limiting of resources among a significant number of humanities workers who are providing capital and research for the global neoliberal research university. *Journal of Higher Education*. 2005; vol. 76, no. 3. 243-275.

⁴ See Steve Shulman in "Contingency in Higher Education: Evidence and Explanation" from *Academic Labor: Research and Artistry* (2017), which discusses the growing army of adjunct faculty based on university financial exigency over need.

⁵ Prior to *Columbia* (2016), the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) issued an invitation for amici briefs on four main issues: should Brown be overturned or changed; if so, what would be the new standard for undergraduate and master's students; is a unit of graduate, undergraduate, and master's students appropriate; and, if Brown were to be changed or overturned, what would be the new measure (1). The amici (including Yale, Dartmouth, Cornell, and Harvard) argued six major points: private university workers were students first, collective bargaining would intrude on academic freedom, private was not the same industry as public, rights must be granted on a case to case basis, research assistants are not included, undergraduate and master's students should also be included, and the employment of a graduate worker was casual ("Brief of Amici Curiae Brown University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, University of

Pennsylvania, Princeton University, Stanford University, Yale University”).

⁶ Reed College argued similarly, firstly that the Housing Assistants (HA’s) were not employees due to their status as students. Student Workers Coalition, Local 1, led by Seth Douglas argued they were due to their tax status as employees (Douglas). While they may also learn valuable skills from their workplace, the purpose of HAs was an exchange of labor for goods and services, not an educational endeavor.

⁷ A common institutional argument that unionization is impossible due to FERPA privacy rights for student employees and the other students they serve in their capacity as resident assistant (RA) or another employ, undergraduate unions have no issues accepting contracts with this FERPA language included. See Anthony Fitzpatrick in “Undergraduate Unionizing: A New Frontier” *Post-Columbian World.*” *Iowa Law Review*, 106 Iowa L. Rev. 1393 (2021).

⁸ The *New York* (200) ruling did not preclude undergraduates from ever being considered for unionization under NLRB jurisdiction. Undergraduates were present at New York University (NYU) doing similar work; however, they were not included in the petitioned for bargaining unit due to their temporary status of less than a semester, “While the petition only includes graduate tutors and graders, both graduate and undergraduate students receive such assignments, generally on a nonrecurring basis, with appointments lasting from one week to one semester” (1217).

⁹ See S. Henkel in “Working Conditions and Learning Conditions after the National Labor Relations Board’s Brown University Decision” for a further discussion on how banning graduate employee unionization will lead to unrest, *Workplace*, 12, 44- 53.s.

¹⁰ *Stanford* (1974) also attempted unionization of graduate employees.

¹¹ Post Brown, Abram in *PMLA* argued that collective bargaining should be amended to meet both employees and institutions meaning that the law would have to be changed (1191).

¹² Unionization of campus and hospital janitors occurred five years prior in 1945 (Askin).

¹³ Famed organizer and business agent, Regina Polk was at the forefront of organizing these white-collar women workers for higher wages and fair treatment. See Terry Hesser, *I am a Teamster*, Lake Claremont Press, 2008.

¹⁴ See Sean Rogers et al. in “Effects of Unionization on Graduate Student Employees: Faculty-Student Relations, Academic Freedom, and Pay” which argues unionization of graduate employees has no effect on academic freedom, overwhelmingly, pay was better and there was a sense of collegial support among the workers (504, 506).

¹⁵ According to the “Notice of Election” from the NLRB, “The election conducted on November 16 and 17, 2016 was set aside because the National Labor Relations Board found that the Employer’s failure to

provide a complete Voter List interfered with the employees' exercise of a free and reasoned choice" (President and Fellows of Harvard College).

¹⁶ Grinnell College and the Union of Grinnell Student Dining Workers (UGSDW) argued for a base of \$10.40 their first year and \$10.75 for the second-year contract. They are currently bargaining and asking for \$15 hourly ("Your Contract").

Appendix- Message to Membership via SLEU Facebook Page May 23, 2017

ATTENTION LIBRARY WORKERS: In the past two days you will have received several emails from the University administration with strong messaging about why student library workers should caution against unionizing. However, the real message is clear: when the University positions itself as anti-union, it is anti-student.

When we earn low wages, work on erratic schedules, and receive no support in the face of Title IX, ADA, and labor violations, our jobs as student library workers interfere with our ability to be students. Only as unionized workers will we be able to protect our rights as well as fully engage in the academic mission of the University of Chicago.

The University fundamentally misunderstands how a union works when it argues that student workers will lose agency in the terms of their employment. As unionized workers, we will finally have a seat at the table in the discussions and decisions that affect our lives. We will be able to participate in mandatory contract negotiations with the University administration and receive legal representation in cases of workplace violations. This ability is especially necessary for student employees, as the administration has habitually failed to meet with students in a timely or productive manner.

With the resources and guidance of the Teamsters Local 743, the union that already represents many career library workers and dining staff on campus, we will be able to make real progress toward our goals of higher wages, fair schedules, and a better and more transparent recourse on workplace violations. Our main priority is to have our voices heard and our needs represented as a community of student library workers.

We call on the University to remain impartial in this election to unionize, and to let students make an informed decision that will represent their own interests as workers.

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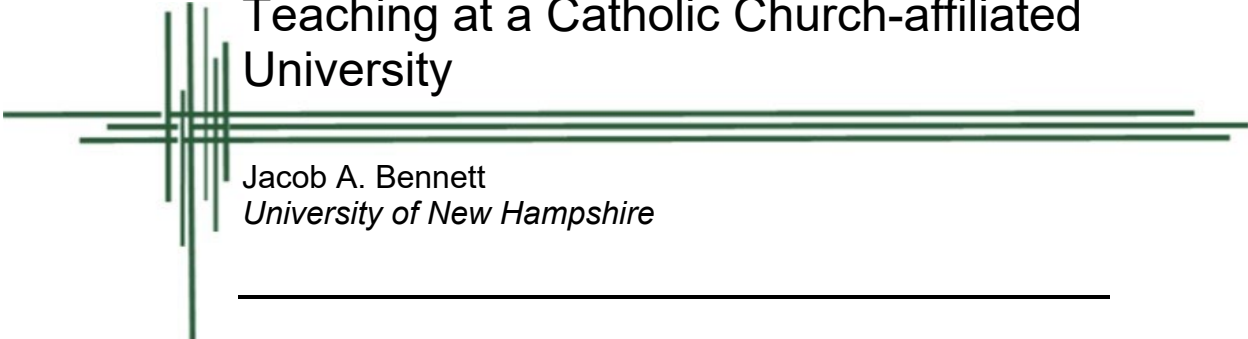
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Speaking of Dignity: Interviews with Non-Unionized Adjunct Faculty Teaching at a Catholic Church-affiliated University

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Abstract

With the 130-year labor-affirmative tradition of Catholic Social Teaching (“CST”) in mind, this paper presents findings from interviews conducted during the summer of 2019 and answers the research question: *How do non-unionized adjunct faculty employed by an English Department in a Catholic Church-affiliated university describe their experiences of dignity and how do those faculty reflect on the meanings of those experiences?* In the introduction I briefly summarize the study and describe site and participant selection. I then review theories of workplace dignity derived from CST and secular sociology; describe the methodology and methods behind the study; introduce the participants; report participant experiences as interpreted through themes relevant to workplace dignity (*autonomy, citizenship, resistance, sociability*); and conclude with thoughts about how emerging themes (*vulnerability, marginality, boundaries, community*) comport with extant literature on the gigification of higher education faculty labor, and point to the responsibility of religiously-affiliated institutions to safeguard dignity in letter *and* spirit.

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Dignity is at the center of the Catholic Church’s labor teachings going back to Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical “on capital and labor,” *Rerum Novarum*, in which he writes that it is the duty of “the wealthy owner and the employer[] not to look upon their work people as their bondsmen, but to respect in every man his dignity as a person ennobled by Christian character” (par. 20). Dignity is also central to secular conceptions of work, including sociological studies of the role of dignity in the workplace (Barber; Bolton; Budd; Hodson), and also including a much broader set of texts that may not explicitly claim dignity as a focus but which focus on closely related issues like the experiences of underrepresented minorities in higher education (Wright II and Calhoun; Zambrana), the community-based approach of “bargaining for the greater good” (McCartin; Sneiderman and McCartin), and the working conditions and perspectives of part-time faculty overall (Berry; Coalition on Academic Workforce; Dubson; Gappa et al.; Gappa and Leslie; Lyons; US GAO).

Dignity is something all people experience, including in their work lives. Many religious doctrines and sociological theories attest to broad agreement that dignity is inherent to the human condition and that while it can be diminished or amplified, it cannot be taken away or bestowed. My purpose in the study² described here is to reconstruct experiences of a small group of non-unionized adjunct faculty teaching in the English Department at “Urban Catholic University,”³ and to interpret those experiences in terms of workplace dignity. I use the term “adjunct” to describe the part-time, short-term, non-benefitted faculty appointment of the study participants. (For more on typology and usage, see § II.C.)

Findings in this paper derive from nine interviews with three participants, which were conducted during the summer of 2019. The study asks: *How do non-unionized adjunct faculty employed by an English Department in a Catholic Church-affiliated university describe their experiences of “dignity” and how do those faculty reflect on the meanings of those experiences?* The interview method described below allowed participants to:

- give voice to formative home, school, and workplace experiences, specifically as they pertain to the question of how they each arrived in their adjunct roles;
- reconstruct a typical day in their role as adjunct English instructor at Urban Catholic University; and
- reflect on the meaning of their experiences in terms of dignity, and to recommend changes they believe would improve their sense of dignity in the workplace.

In the following sections, I review literature on conceptions of workplace dignity derived from Catholic Social Teaching (“CST”) and secular sociology, as well as literature on contingency studies; describe the

methodology and methods behind the study; introduce the participants in the study; report participant experiences as interpreted through several received themes; and conclude with thoughts about how emerging themes line up with extant literature describing the “gigification” of higher education faculty work (Tolley; Kezar et al.).

Brief Review of Literatures

A Catholic Sense of Workplace Dignity

Sison et al., pose a useful question to guide this brief review of the Catholic sense of human dignity: “What specific contributions could CST make to the understanding of human dignity and the dignity of work?” (504).

Among other meanings, dignity in the context of CST “refers to the intrinsic worth or value of every human being that distinguishes him from any other creature. This worth or value is often associated with the capacity for reason and autonomy or ‘self-determination’ through free choice” (506; paraphrasing Pope Paul VI, paras. 15-17). Modern notions of dignity in CST originate in a foundational document of the Catholic tradition of support for labor rights, *Rerum Novarum*, in which Pope Leo XIII insists on “a dictate of natural justice more imperious and ancient than any bargain between man and man” (para. 45). From 1891 onward the tradition of CST is unequivocal with regard to the centrality of dignity to church teachings and is just as unequivocal about the central spirituality of dignity. Pope John XXIII, we are reminded, established human dignity as the “one basic principle” of CST and centered “individual human beings [as] the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution” (Sison et al., 506; quoting Pope John XXIII, paras. 219-220).

Adding to this certainty about the foundational aspect of dignity, several Popes also have a lot to say about its indelibility. Pope John XXIII suggests that even the starkest ethical lapses cannot separate a person from their dignity:

A man who has fallen into error does not cease to be a man. He never forfeits his personal dignity; and that is something that must always be taken into account. (para. 158)

Even in the face of inevitable human fallibility, Pope Paul VI reinforces the difference between moral fault and forfeiture of dignity, writing that “it is necessary to distinguish between error, which always merits repudiation, and the person in error, who never loses the dignity of being a person” (para. 28). However, “[a]lthough basic dignity cannot be lost, nevertheless, it should be developed. And not everyone achieves this nor achieves it to the same degree, because it depends on free choices and actions” (Sison et al., 509). This development, again according to Pope Paul VI, involves individual responsibility and autonomy: “Hence man’s dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal

impulse nor by mere external pressure” (para. 17). But society also plays a role, in that “[h]uman institutions, both private and public, must labor to minister to the dignity and purpose of man” (para. 29).

In a sense, the workplace is one site common across human experience where these social and individual responsibilities join together to *develop* dignity, regardless of the type of work or nature of employment. As Sison et al., put it, “early Christian thinkers known as the Church Fathers [...] did not share the belief that work was an ‘*opus servile*’ (servile act); rather, it was as an ‘*opus humanum*’ (human act) worthy of honor” (512; citing Pontifical Council). Pope John Paul II agrees that there is something about the nature of work, the toil of it, that is honorable and that enhances the dignity of the worker:

in spite of all this toil—perhaps, in a sense, because of it—work is a good thing for man. Even though it bears the mark of a *bonum arduum*, in the terminology of Saint Thomas, this does not take away the fact that, as such, it is a good thing for man. It is not only good in the sense that it is useful or something to enjoy; it is also good as being something worthy, that is to say, something that corresponds to man’s dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it. (para. 9)

CST describes labor as an experience that can and *should* be enjoyable and beneficial, a spiritual good sometimes borne of arduousness.

A Secular Sense of Workplace Dignity

In addition to helping answer the questions of dignity’s place in CST and as a religious concern, Sison et al., pose another useful question that might also guide a review of the secular sense of both human dignity and workplace dignity: “What is their value in a largely secular and democratic society and for people who do not adhere to the Catholic credo?” (504). One of the basic understandings conveyed in the article by Sison et al., is that one need not be a practicing Catholic, or even agree with any of the religious tenets of the Catholic Church—“belief in a Transcendent Being” (507) for instance— in order to agree to some of its positions on human dignity. The publication of an article on the CST foundations of workplace dignity in a secular journal of business ethics reinforces the sense that certain “secular warrants,” or “reasons accessible to non-religious persons,” (507) may be seen as overlapping with the Catholic assumption that God is divine, that God created humanity in His image, and that, therefore, humanity is inherently dignified. According to Catholic faith-based reasoning, “human beings are capable of entering into a unique personal relationship with God” (508); however, Sison et al., also note that we may “find ‘secular warrants’ of this relational aspect of dignity and personhood in the Aristotelian account of human nature as a ‘social’ or ‘political animal,’ a ‘rational animal’” (507; quoting Aristotle, 1253a). It

is possible, then, to consider the foundational relation of dignity to human life, including workplace experience, without recourse to the concept of *imago Dei*, which holds that “all human beings are made in God’s image and likeness” (505).

Budd (2004) observes: “Religious views on the sanctity of human life and respect for human dignity often closely resemble secular ethical conceptions of human dignity” (21). Springing as it does from the social teachings of the Catholic Church, my interest in the experiences of adjunct faculty in a Catholic- affiliated setting now seems, in retrospect, to have always been about dignity rather than strictly about labor law, metrics like job satisfaction, or the faculty labor market. Of course, these issues span religious and secular theories of workplace economics and ethics, as Budd notes when discussing the Catholic Church doctrine regarding labor and capital:

[The Catholic Church] roots this doctrine in the belief that labor markets fall short of the theoretical ideal of economics textbooks[...]. Consequently, employers and employees, capital and labor, are not equals, and unregulated market-based outcomes will favor employers at the expense of employees with the potential for abuse. (Budd, 3)

My interviews with the participants to this study reinforce the suggestion that market ideals are not in line with CST, and neither are the adjunct labor practices of Urban Catholic University.

Contingency Studies

Adjunct. Casual. Contingent. Contract. Temporary. Unbundled. Seasonal. Just-in- time. Many descriptors such as those above have been applied to part-time faculty in American higher education, constituting a typology that confounds comprehensive study (Kezar and Sam). The study of faculty and the ways their employment conditions may be impacted by political or other non-academic considerations fills out a robust literature going back as far as the 1915 founding of the Association of American University Professors (AAUP) and Veblen’s classic criticism of corporate and political influence in higher education, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men*. Whether discussing two- or four-year, public or private, non- or for-profit, online or brick-and-mortar, secular or religious institutions, up and down the Carnegie Classification system there is evidence of the transformation of the professoriate from a predominantly tenure-holding or -eligible population to one marked by tenuous job security, poverty-level wages, benefits ineligibility, decreased access to governance structures, denial of due process, diminished academic freedom, and detachment from the communities into which they have been hired (Gappa

and Leslie; Hollenshead et al.; Kezar and Sam; Schneider; United States House Committee on Education and the Workforce).

By the mid-1970s (Ladd and Lipset; Berlow and Collos; Tuckman; Van Arsdale), there was already a good sense that American higher education institutions were relying on a more and more destabilized instructional workforce, with studies continuing over the following decades (Gappa; Gappa and Leslie; Kezar and Sam; Morpew et al., “Changes in Faculty Composition” and “Contingent Faculty Composition”). Many terms and typologies have been used to conceptualize the meaning and purpose of “adjunct” and “contingent” faculty in higher education; though preferring “non-tenure-track faculty” (“NTTF”), Kezar and Sam describe the variety of typology, titles, and institutional employment of those who constitute the “new faculty majority” (Maisto).

My focus on adjunct faculty in an English department was spurred, in part, by my own experiences as an adjunct and also as a full-time non-tenure-track lecturer teaching composition and literature courses at La Salle University. I was also encouraged in this line of inquiry by calls like the one Hammer (“Reframing the Discourse”) published in the pages of *Forum*, the journal of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, urging scholars “to begin studying how the physical, material, institutional, and economic marginalization formed by contingency creates complex barriers to instructor support and retention and further alters the quality of instruction” (A1).

Of course, there are studies that predate Hammer’s (“The Need for Research”) coinage of a higher education workforce-focused “Contingency Studies,” including one described by Schell and Stock, who focus on the instructional staffing of lower-level and especially introductory composition courses. They argue that “composition studies may well be viewed as a canary in an academic mine in which contingent faculty have worked (at risk, underground, out of sight) to support others’ more visible, more attractive labor” (19). They add:

Composition studies is a particularly fitting vantage point from which to study the academy’s turn toward contingent employment as it has long been an instructional area staffed by non-tenure-track faculty. Most colleges and universities require first-year students to take one or two introductory composition courses, which are often staffed by non-tenure-track faculty and graduate teaching assistants. (20)

I also rely on a study by Trainor and Godley that recounts a process by which two campuses in a state university responded to a directive that all remedial courses, such as Basic Writing, were “relocated to local community colleges” (153). In one case, the university-level adjuncts who formerly taught those courses were replaced by “part-time instructors

hired through the local community college at salaries lower than those the university used to pay.” In addition to the lower wages, Trainor and Godley note that “these instructors have virtually no contact with the English department at State U-Oakdale, nor are they enfranchised members of the community college,” a set of labor conditions that shows just how precarious employment can be for adjuncts teaching in lower-level courses.

In setting the foundation and describing the impetus for their study, Schell and Stock cite studies conducted by Tuckman and Volger, Abel, and Gappa and Leslie, showing the longevity and growth of the faculty employment crisis. These studies, including their development of typologies intended to explain motivations to take a part-time adjunct position, suggest that the conditions of an adjunct’s employment affect their experience depending in part on whether one is looking at an English instructor aspiring for a full-time offer or at one who works as an author or editor but moonlights to teach a course every now and again.

One of the most compelling findings with regard to job satisfaction among adjunct faculty suggests the importance of the distinction between voluntary and involuntary part-time employment. Several studies that pinpoint this distinction have been conducted with a view toward “better understand[ing] the nuances in satisfaction among part-time faculty” (Eagan et al. 450). Such studies examine differences in satisfaction between voluntary part-time faculty—those part-timers who choose or prefer to work part-time—and involuntary part-time faculty—individuals who teach part-time but would prefer a full-time faculty appointment. These studies have found voluntary part-time faculty to be significantly more satisfied with various aspects of their academic work compared to their involuntary part-time colleagues. (Eagan et al. 450)

While some studies (Antony and Valadez; Antony and Hayden; Maynard and Joseph) report greater satisfaction among part-time faculty than full-time faculty on certain employment elements, they also show a difference in levels of satisfaction among part-timers based on voluntary or involuntary part-time status. Antony and Hayden observe that “job-fit analysis indicates that satisfaction for voluntary part-time employees will likely be higher than involuntary part-time employees” (704, citing Maynard and Joseph). Antony and Hayden add that “63 to 75% of those part-time faculty members who report the highest levels of satisfaction also indicate not preferring a full-time job” (705). Ott and Dippold reinforce the importance of disaggregating part-timers based on their voluntary or involuntary part-time-ness: “[R]ecent studies find between 49% and 60% of part-time community college faculty would rather have a full-time appointment” (190). Citing other studies, Ott and Dippold add that “researchers have also found part-time faculty who desire a full-time job are less content with compensation, advancement, recognition, and job security, at both two-year (Kramer et al.) and four-year institutions (Maynard and Joseph).” (191)

Bringing this discussion of motivation back to the cohort of participants I recruited, Gappa et al. report that “in 1998, only 15 percent of part-timers in the health sciences sought full-time academic jobs, in contrast to 65 percent of part-timers in the fine arts and 61 percent in the humanities, who reported that they were teaching on a part-time basis because full-time jobs were not available, either in academe or elsewhere” (95). Lastly, Gappa et al. dispel any notion that most part-time faculty are “satisfied” by their employment:

Although the part-time faculty is largely heterogeneous, made up of people with highly varied life circumstances and motivations for teaching, these faculty members’ employment conditions are not heterogeneous. Regardless of their performance, the length of their employment, their qualifications for their positions, or the needs of their institutions, part-time faculty in most colleges and universities are employed under exploitative practices. [...] In good circumstances, part-timers become valued and established colleagues despite the informality and insecurity of their employment. In the worst circumstances, part-timers remain marginal and are subject to capricious and arbitrary treatment. (p. 96)

In addition to studies focused on disciplinary employment trends and job satisfaction, studies published by Bettinger and Long (“Do College Instructors Matter?”) suggest that negative effects of adjunct instruction on student success and interest are more likely in the humanities than in professional or occupational studies:

in general, adjunct and graduate assistant instructors reduce subsequent interest in a subject relative to full-time, tenure-track faculty, but this effect is small and differs widely by discipline. We find that adjuncts negatively affect students in the humanities and sciences while positively affecting students in some of the professional fields, particularly in terms of success in subsequent courses. In many cases, adjuncts under the age of 40 account for the estimated negative effects suggesting that recent movements towards hiring young instructors, who are often inexperienced and have not completed doctoral study, is negatively impacting students. (4)

Indeed, there are several studies of student outcomes that suggest variable impacts depending on age and length of career, discipline, and motivation to teach in a part- or full-time role (Kezar and Maxey).

Methodology and Methods

The study addresses the following research question: *How do non-unionized adjunct faculty employed by an English Department in a Catholic Church-affiliated university describe their experiences of “dignity” and how do those faculty reflect on the meanings of those experiences?* At the core of this investigation, then, is the sense individuals make of certain phenomena, and the contexts in which they make that sense. In this section I describe a conceptual framework integrating social construction with hermeneutic phenomenology, and also describe data sources including interviewee and document selection criteria. In the end, I believe I designed a study that was useful in discovering the meaning the participants attached to their experiences of a phenomenon—dignity—that has been theorized in religious and secular literature.

Conceptual Framework

In conceptualizing this study, I have relied in the first place on the social constructionist theory articulated by Berger and Luckmann, “that reality is socially constructed” (1). In other words, the social construction theory construes meaning as derived not only from a person’s experience but also as informed by the social world(s) in which that person has had that experience; that meaning is constructed through an ongoing socio-historical process that varies across time and place, and which builds on culturally-received notions. This theory has been applied to organizational inquiry, with Ott arguing that “organizational culture is a socially constructed concept” (52; citing Berger and Luckmann, Holzner and Marx, and Mead). Similarly, Tierney differentiates between “objective” and “enacted” environments (9-13), with the former conception being based in a “rational, objective, ‘real’” (10) epistemology, and the latter assuming that “reality is defined through a process of social interchange” (12). Ultimately, a study designed to capture the voices and experiences of a particular organization’s members will require that I “enter the field with a theoretical framework based on the assumption that organizations are socially constructed” (15).

A good example of the application of social construction theory to the experience faculty have of a particular phenomenon is Kezar’s “Non-Tenure-Track Faculty’s Social Construction of a Supportive Work Environment,” which combines social construction with symbolic interactionism (rather than with hermeneutic phenomenology in the case of my study), attempting an understanding of the ways people make sense or meaning from their work world. As Kezar puts it: “The pivotal argument is that a person’s sense of reality is impacted by his or her social contexts and experiences” (6). My study takes that argument as granted.

In addition to the theory of socially constructed meaning, I also rely on a form of hermeneutic phenomenology for conceptual framing. Creswell writes that “a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (57). I would clarify that I am pursuing not *that*

phenomenology that “seeks a correct answer or valid interpretation of texts not dependent on the biographical, social or historical position of the interpreter” (Lavery, 27-28), but rather have practiced a hermeneutic phenomenology that “focuses on meaning that arises from the interpretive interaction between historically produced texts and the reader” (28). Hermeneutic phenomenology does not strive for a “correct” interpretation but rather one that has been constructed by the individual within their socio-historical context. Writing that “hermeneutic phenomenology is a philosophy of the personal, the individual, which we pursue against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the *logos* of *other*, the *whole*, the *communal*, or the *social*” (7), van Manen approximates my own understanding. If the call to arms of Husserl’s phenomenology was oriented “to the things themselves” (Crotty, 78) then the rally of hermeneutic phenomenology advocated by van Manen might be oriented “to an interpretation of an experience of the things.”

Because I hold the ontological view that all persons share a world but that each has their individual world-view derived from experience and cultural inheritance, I will not attempt the kind of bracketing that is commonly associated with phenomenology (Crotty; Lindseth and Norberg; Kakkori; Creswell). The process is meant as a check on bias, but assumes, first, that there is some “essence” or “essential meaning” attached to the given, objective world, and second, that it is possible for a person to put aside or disentangle their socially constructed sense of reality in order to see things themselves from “the natural attitude” (Moustakas, 85; Giorgi, 91-92; Kakkori, p. 22). I disagree that an object of thought can be reduced to any essential meaning, and further disagree that it is possible to separate oneself from previous experience in order to see an object without any pre-conceptions or interpretive framework. I believe, with Bevan, that “total abstention is impossible” (138).

Above all, I have striven to interpret and present the participants’ reconstructed experiences and their other statements in a way that is consistent with their own interpretations. At two points following the interview portion of the study, I provided participants with drafts for their review, including demographic data and extensive quotation from the interview transcripts, and asked final consent based on that review. I received no requests to amend, remove, or otherwise change any aspect of those drafts.

Data Sources

Sources for this study include phenomenological interviews (Seidman, *Interviewing*) with adjunct faculty in the English Department at Urban Catholic University. I also reviewed institutional documents that constitute the structure of the working environment and conditions and help to clarify a sense of the organization’s culture and that culture’s values as they pertain to the adjuncts participating in my study (Urban Catholic University, *Faculty Handbook*; *Mission Statement*; *Orientation*

for New Faculty; University Statutes). Notwithstanding Urban Catholic University's mission statement and references made by the university to the intellectual tradition of the Catholic Church, the function of the institution as it pertains to the employment of its adjunct faculty is broadly indistinguishable from other colleges and universities with no religious affiliation at all, whether public or private.

While direct quotation is not feasible if I am to maintain participants' anonymity, relevant sections of the university's governing documents clarify the position and role of the adjuncts interviewed for this study. While allowing that some adjuncts may be hired on a full-time basis in the case of a research grant, for instance, university documents also note that those *full-time* adjuncts are to be referred to as non-tenure-track faculty, in line with typological study of faculty titles (Kezar and Sam), and that any part-time faculty, regardless of title, will be considered adjuncts and accorded the same limited rights and responsibilities.

Regarding this study's participants and others in similar positions across departments at Urban Catholic University, the institution views them as instructional staff on part-time and short-term appointments; does *not* require in-class observation for purposes of their reappointment (or non-reappointment); prohibits them from participating in university-wide committees; and establishes a grievance process separate from that available for full-time faculty on and off the tenure track. These guiding documents describe a tiered workforce with distinct boundaries proscribed around adjuncts compared to full-time colleagues. As noted elsewhere (Elliott and Steuben; AAUP, "1915 Declaration"), the absence of an expectation of continued employment as faculty undermines Urban Catholic's guarantees of academic freedom for adjuncts.

Interview Design

In a 2017 conference presentation, Seidman stated the issue clearly: "At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals' stories because they are of worth in and of themselves and because they have something to say to your inquiry" (slide 5). The interview protocol under discussion was Seidman's phenomenological interviewing guide, which I have used for this study. The guide calls for the researcher to interview each participant three times, for 90 minutes per session, with the following goals for each session:

- Interview One: Focused Life History: "In the first interview, the interviewer's task is to put the participant's experience in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time." (Seidman, *Interviewing*, 21)
- Interview Two: The Details of Experience: "The purpose of the second interview is to concentrate on the concrete details of the

participants' present lived experience in the topic area of the study. We ask them to reconstruct these details." (21)

- Interview Three: Reflection on the Meaning: "In the third interview, we ask participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience." (22)

The process of making sense or making meaning has already begun by the time the participant puts experience into words, and likely starts in earnest during the period between recruitment and sitting for the first interview. The final interview helps to clarify the meaning that has been constructed by the participants, but "can be productive only if the foundation for it has been established in the first two [interviews]" (22).

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Following from Maxwell, I adhered to "purposive selection" (97) of interview participants. In this method of selection, participants "are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant" to the study's questions. Among the goals for purposive selection, Maxwell begins with the goal of "achieving representativeness or typicality of the settings, individuals, or activities selected" (98). As the literature suggests, the "typical" adjunct in an English department is likely employed part-time to teach lower-level courses and is more likely than not to be interested in full-time employment with one institution.

The names and contact information for current adjuncts in the English Department at Urban Catholic University are all listed on the Department's Web pages, which simplified the recruitment process and nullified any need for identifying gatekeepers, or "persons who hold the key to access and entree to a particular field site" (Magolda and Weems, 494). I planned to select participants for interviews on the basis of the following criteria:

- part-time faculty in the English department;
- primarily teaching introductory or lower-level courses;
- interested in full-time faculty employment.

To the extent possible, I sought a cohort of participants at different points in their teaching careers and who represent diverse gender and racial and ethnic categories. However, with a pool of only twenty possible participants in the department, I had little control or influence over the demographics of the participant group. That said, the three participants, all of whom identified as white women, made up 14.2% of the adjunct population of the department. The participants were at various stages of their respective careers, with one participant having taught at Urban Catholic for eight years, another for closer to two years, and one who taught one semester as a doctoral student and one semester as an adjunct before taking a full-time non-tenure-track position at another institution. None of the participants were practicing Catholics, nor were they required to be for employment purposes.

One last aspect of the selection process involved determining an appropriate site. My original plans for the study involved interviewing a unionized cohort of adjuncts, but at the time I was developing the study there were only eight examples of adjunct faculty unions at Catholic-affiliated colleges or universities across the nation (Catholic Labor Network). With only one in the region where I could reasonably expect to be available for in-person interviewing (a typical and relatively uncomplicated expectation in 2019), I ran into the ethical question of whether I could offer effective anonymity to participants without the added protection of masking their employer institution's name. Determining that I could not make such an offer, I endeavored instead to seek participants from the much longer list of non-unionized Catholic Church-affiliated institutions.

Adjunct Policies at Urban Catholic University

At the time of my study, there were two policies at Urban Catholic University that applied specifically and only to adjunct faculty on part-time, short-term, non-benefitted appointments. The first grants adjuncts access to the university's medical and dental benefits after teaching four courses each academic year, five years in a row. (As one participant noted in interviews with me, the health benefits are not automatic and must be opted into by the adjunct, which I confirmed through review of the policy.) The other policy limits adjunct faculty weekly working hours to 29 to avoid triggering Affordable Care Act requirements to offer healthcare to full-time employees working at least 30 hours per week. This standard equates to a two full-credit course load for adjuncts to qualify as part-time, at Urban Catholic and elsewhere. This two-course norm derives from a rule promulgated by the Internal Revenue Service that relied on testimony provided before the US House Committee on Education and the Workforce. In that final rule the IRS determined that institutions of higher education will

credit an adjunct faculty member of an institution of higher education with (a) 2¼ hours of service (representing a combination of teaching or classroom time and time performing related tasks such as class preparation and grading of examinations or papers) per week for each hour of teaching or classroom time (in other words, in addition to crediting an hour of service for each hour teaching in the classroom, this method would credit an additional 1¼ hours for activities such as class preparation and grading) and, separately, (b) an hour of service per week for each additional hour outside of the classroom the faculty member spends performing duties he or she is required to perform (such as required office hours or required attendance at faculty meetings). (IRS, 8552)

As one participant noted in interviews with me, the health benefits are not automatic and must be opted into by the adjunct, which I confirmed through review of the policy. All three participants noted that the two-course “cap” appears to be incredibly flexible in the sense that the department frequently offers a third course to adjuncts, who must sign a waiver of full-time recognition and attendant benefits. Two of the participants had repeatedly been hired as mentors and advisors above and beyond their two-course-per-term teaching appointments, but the IRS rule does not count the non-instructional and instructional duties in combination.

It is possible, in other words, for adjuncts to work a full-time equivalent across several functions at Urban Catholic without gaining recognition, pay, or benefits commensurate with a full-time position, whether comparing to a full-time non-tenure-track or tenure-track position. And the university is in compliance with federal regulations when it knowingly limits adjuncts’ hours in instructional roles in order to avoid triggering the healthcare requirement, while simultaneously offering additional part-time opportunities like advising that are traditionally bundled into a full-time faculty position, especially if that position is on the tenure track.

Introducing the Participants

“May”

May identifies as a white woman, holds an undergraduate degree in the social sciences and an MFA in creative writing, and as of August 2019 had taught as a part-time English instructor at Urban Catholic for sixteen consecutive semesters, not including summers: eight years, during which time she sometimes also taught in similar roles at other nearby institutions of higher education. Urban Catholic repeatedly employed May as a student adviser over the summer months and school-year, and even offered overload courses. Just these basic contours of May’s employment indicate the problematic nomenclature that distinguishes between full- and part-time faculty members: May has been hired into a nominally part-time teaching role, asked to teach more than the two-course adjunct load on more than one occasion, and also been hired to conduct advising duties. In another scenario, May might be hired to teach on a full-time contract, as is her stated preference. Even without a doctorate, May was still qualified for a non-tenure-track annual contract that would likely include up to four courses per semester and could also include advising or other institutional service responsibilities. Instead, as a means to reduce commitment to a long-time employee, and to avoid providing benefits or paying a regular salary across nine or twelve months, Urban Catholic offers unbundled portions of the tripartite role of the traditional faculty position: teaching is separated from advising and other service, and research or other scholarly production is not an expected part of the arrangement. Given the apparent holding pattern of her career at Urban Catholic after 8 years, May was in

the process of reconsidering her options for the future when we concluded our final interview.

“June”

June identifies as a white woman, holds undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral degrees in English Literature and as of August 2019 had taught as a part-time English instructor at Urban Catholic for ten consecutive semesters, not including summers: eight while writing her dissertation; two part-time as a post-doc. Her graduate degrees were also earned at Urban Catholic. During that span of time, including graduate teaching, she sometimes also taught at other nearby institutions of higher education and directed or co-directed pedagogical trainings and conference proceedings. Urban Catholic repeatedly employed June as a student adviser over the summer months and school-year, and even offered overload courses. Just these basic contours of June’s employment indicate the problematic nomenclature that distinguishes between full- and part-time faculty members: June has been hired into a nominally part-time teaching role, asked to teach more than the two- course adjunct load on more than one occasion, and also been hired to conduct advising duties. In another scenario, June might be hired to teach on a full-time contract, as is her stated preference. Instead, as a means to reduce commitment to a long-time employee, and to avoid providing benefits or paying a regular salary across nine or twelve months, Urban Catholic offers unbundled portions of the tripartite role of the traditional faculty position: teaching is separated from advising and other service, and research or other scholarly production is not an expected part of the arrangement.

“July” (JOO-lee)

July (JOO-lee) identifies as a white woman, holds undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral degrees in English literature, and taught first-year writing at Urban Catholic University for three semesters: two as a master’s student at Urban Catholic, and one as a part-time instructor. In between those two stints, July pursued her doctorate, returning to the same region as Urban Catholic after receiving the degree. July’s path to teaching as a part-time faculty member involved re- connecting with a professor she knew from when she’d earned a master’s; this experience mirrors both May’s and June’s pathways to their positions, which were arbitrary and reliant on personal connections with faculty in the department. Alongside the part-time role at Urban Catholic, July simultaneously held a similar role at another university closer to her residence, and considered her teaching to be her full-time career, desiring a full-time role at one institution. July left her role at Urban Catholic when she was hired into a full-time non-tenure-track position at that other university.

Participant Experiences of Workplace Dignity

I met with each participant for about 4.5 hours over a series of three open-ended 90-minute interviews begun and completed in the month of August 2019. For the first two interviews I provided skeletal preparation, though prior to the third interview sent detailed descriptions of Hodson's themes of workplace dignity, discussed below. The prompts for each session were:

- First interview: *How did you come to be employed as an adjunct at Urban Catholic University? Please reconstruct any home, work, or educational experiences you believe led you here.*
- Second interview: *Could you reconstruct your typical work day, or related work routines, as an adjunct in the English Department at Urban Catholic University?*
- Third interview: *Given what you have said about your life before you became an adjunct at Urban Catholic University and given what you have said about your work now, how do you understand your experience of dignity in that role?*

Participants all expressed frustration in the ways the institution, from the level of the department on up, failed to support them in their pursuits of dignity. At no point did I provide a definition of the word "dignity" to any participant, letting each (re)construct her own sense of the phenomenon in the process of talking about work experiences.

I have organized the following subsections according to the four themes Hodson derived in his analysis of the means by which employees maintain or enhance their sense of workplace dignity: *autonomy, citizenship, resistance, and sociability*.⁴ Hodson's themes derive from a sociological review of more than one hundred workplace ethnographies, and the themes he derived from that study are broadly compatible with notions of dignity described throughout CST and relevant literature.

Autonomy

Workplace autonomy is inseparable from the common understanding of professionalism, but that expectation is inverted in the adjunct work described by participants. Given what the participants to this study have said about their worry over student evaluations of their work, it appears that the organizational scheme under which they work is in some sense better described as one of supervisory fiat and not professionalism. More than that, the supervisory apparatus described by the faculty I interviewed is staffed neither by the adjunct faculty member's professional colleagues nor their actual supervisors, but by students who complete end-of-semester course evaluations, often the only review an adjunct receives for their work in the classroom. Even while "valid, reliable, and unbiased" (Esarey and Valdes), student evaluations of teaching ("SETs") have dubious effectiveness as a measure of faculty quality or student learning (American Sociological Association; Uttl et al.), they have also been shown to mirror broader social biases that negatively impact evaluations for women in particular (Mitchell and Martin). This reliance on student evaluations is

quite distinct from the classroom observation by a peer or supervisor explicitly required in order to review full-time non-tenure-track faculty for renewal at Urban Catholic University (*Statutes*). In the absence of a rigorous scheme for promotion or renewal, such as what is provided in the case of tenure-track and even non-tenure-track faculty on one-year or other term appointments, the rationale for requiring peer observation falls away for adjunct faculty; but the import of the student evaluation ominously remains.

June's sense of autonomy in the class is complicated, as it is for the other interviewees. By way of showing how compromised her sense of autonomy is, she describes her experience of what could be coined the "proxy management" of adjunct faculty by the students in their courses who complete end-of-term evaluations. Even though the work she has been hired to do has clear boundaries in terms of written expectations of office hours availability, both colleagues and, to a greater extent perhaps, students see her time as unbounded and consider her available all the time:

[I]t's weird though because in the regular construction, with like production and things like that, it's like the manager is who you're resisting. That is, the hierarchical person above you. So, part of what makes teaching unbounded, what you're pushing against, for example, when you're like: "No, this is my time. I'm not going to respond to those emails or whatever it is." Like you're pushing against students.

While she recognizes and finds great value in the flexibility and autonomy available to her when it comes to designing assignments, she also recognizes that a lack of peer observation may amount to something other than autonomy in the classroom. In my interpretation of June's thinking, autonomy in isolation is more akin to oblivion, in the sense of "being forgotten." The theme of autonomy is even more complicated by the knowledge that students and colleagues expect constant attention to their requests on part-timers' time, as noted by June, but also in the literature: "It is the unbounded nature of the academic career that is the heart of the problem" (Gappa et al. 69).

The theme of autonomy also came through in May's discussion of professional vulnerability:

[Interviewer: Why is vulnerability something that stands out to you as lacking in those infrequent sorts of encounters or that helps build in those encounters that are more frequent? What is the, the value is not the right word, but what is the...] The different, like what is the quality? [Int.: The quality of that vulnerability that's important?] I think safety would be one. So, you have some trust that whatever you expose to somebody, you're not going to be rejected. Especially if you're talking about work and you're

having a really hard problem and you're in a tenuous position, you're an adjunct. Are you going to get work the next semester? Everybody's fighting for whatever, it's like survival. You're fighting for whatever classes you can get [and] that is not conducive to being honest about what's hard for you as a teacher. So, you would have to feel like people have your back and they're not going to use something that they know about you, against you, to their own advantage.

Citizenship

May spoke of wanting to create programs like those she participated in as a graduate student at another institution:

So, for example, let's start a program where we get undergrads to be involved in an English language learning program with the maintenance workers and staff workers. Let's pull some of our resources and give our grad students teaching experience and offer free creative writing to high school students because we see that that's a lack for them. That creative expression and self-expression and self-advocacy.

Pursuit of such a program of community engagement and development, May believed, was right in line with CST. The problem: such programming would almost certainly require more time and energy than a part-timer could commit without risking financial ruin. And July recalls the real tension that exists for adjuncts who would like to participate in citizenship behaviors by volunteering for department events:

But I was kind of constantly thinking like, "You're such a dumb ass, like, why are you here, spending hours?" And I was working on my dissertation at the time and I was like, "You should not be here. You should be doing your actual work that you get paid for. Or working on your dissertation or like doing something else for you as a person. Because you need to take care of yourself as person."

While the example here relates to July's experience of volunteer work while teaching at another institution, it gives tremendous insight into her sense of citizenship as it pertains to her career teaching English at the postsecondary level, but also spotlights the tension that exists between wanting to volunteer service, whether for the sake of students or to fill out a CV for future faculty applications, but also feeling like the "ask" is too much given the part-time role.

Resistance

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Resistance can seem like the opposite of citizenship, as in a refusal to go above and beyond the job description, but many examples of this kind of behavior are responses to basic job requirements or processes. June minces no words in describing her feeling that the student evaluation of teaching serves as a proxy tool of management in lieu of proper peer observation and even serves management when exercising the power to employ (or not):

I think of myself as notorious for the kind of high standards that I hold students to. I feel like I mentioned this before that like on every course eval, at least one person talks about how I grade too hard. I talked to [students] about it that I do have high standards and they're not—it's because I have seen students meet them. I know that they are possible for them. That it's not some random standard or one time one student got an A or something. Even though sometimes I make them work harder and I ask a lot of them and they don't all like that, but I don't do it—I do it very thoughtfully and I asked a lot very thoughtfully. There is something, like it feels at this point like resistance in some way. Because I'm getting feedback that students want something else and I know that they have an impact on me being hard, me being asked back and I'm like, 'No, I'm not [...] budging, I'm not going to tell you that you're awesome if you're not awesome. I'm just, I won't do it.'

What this example calls to mind is the platform-based gig work of Uber or Lyft drivers, where the companies have removed themselves from the typical employer evaluation process, inserting customer reviews instead:

While earning money by using a platform (instead of having a traditional employer) arguably offers freedom and flexibility to workers, at the same time, many platforms monitor and manage their “independent” workers through the opinions of customers. They deputize customers to serve as “middle managers,” evaluating the services they received, which can lead to disciplining or discharging workers. (Maffie and Elias, 19)

Whereas “[p]rofessional and craft organizations lessen the need for close supervision of work” (Hodson, 76), the adjunct situation embeds close supervision and deputizes students to perform management’s role without content expertise, pedagogical training, or proper anti-bias preparation.

July, too, speaks about frustration with constant calls for service that go out to all staff and faculty of the department:

I kept on kind of reminding myself that like, “Yes, it's great that you're doing this. But these other people are getting paid to like,

be here. You, on the other hand, are getting paid”—at the time, it was like \$5,000 per course—“you are getting paid for your time in a course, and this thing that you're doing now is totally outside of that, that realm of what you need to be doing.”

This frustration quickly led to July's absence from future volunteer events and efforts: “I mean, there are lots of volunteer faculty opportunities at that institution and I did not participate.”

Sociability

This theme comes through mostly as an absence rather than a positive or negative experience for all three participants, though there are some notable and important relationships that June identifies. Many of the social interactions, though, occur in passing, as with administrative staff in the department, or with other part-timers in shared spaces. This is largely a function of class scheduling and also the need for other employment on days when June is not teaching at Urban Catholic. July, too, notes the limited role of interaction with colleagues:

I had social interactions, ones that I valued, ones that I enjoyed during that semester. But it did make me wonder, seeing [sociability] framed like a core pillar of dignity, it does make me wonder if I would've been more tempted to take on more work there if that had been part of my experience all throughout.

The fundamental features of adjunct work, as all three participants observed and which May addresses here, make even basic collegial interactions a challenge:

We all understand that this is not easy work and that we're going to have challenges and we're going to help each other try and sort out those challenges, as simple as that. And that, there has to be some way that the community is kind of deliberately formed, I think in this case. I don't think that's true community generally, but in this case where we're teaching and we're employed and we're at an institution where adjuncts who are there at different days of the week and different times, we're working at other places. We're in and out, that's not going to happen organically. It was very unlikely to happen organically.

Conclusion

From the first interview to the last, all four elements from Hodson's analysis were readily apparent to me; my sense that *autonomy*, *citizenship*, *resistance*, and *sociability* would be useful terms through which to interpret the participants' experiences persisted throughout the entire interview process with all three participants. This was the case despite the

fact that I waited until just before the third interview sessions to identify those themes for the participants. When I did reveal those themes, the participants were all quick to recognize them in their own constructions of past experiences and workday routines. Even though May, June, and July could all speak about obstacles and struggles for dignity in the role as adjunct English faculty, they were all certain that their work in that role was dignified and dignifying—they each found dignity in that work.

The participants spoke of the difficulties of overcoming or embracing *vulnerability* in order to develop trust in the workplace with colleagues and with students, as well as the concomitant challenges posed by adjunct faculty *marginality* in the context of the organization. They lamented the lack of *boundaries* around their limited role, again in terms of both students' and colleagues' time demands. And they aspired to more thoughtful scheduling and other intentional arrangements that might encourage the development of *community* by making their participation more feasible. These challenges, and aspirations, have everything to do with the nature of the adjunct position, which is separated from other faculty positions by UCU policies and by job function. Taken together these emergent themes reinforce another theme present in recent literature: *gigification* (Tolley; Kezar et al.; Maffie and Elias).

Though working for the same *organization* (i.e., institution), the adjunct faculty interviewed for this study were employed under a unique workplace *organization* (i.e., set of policies and practices) as compared to their full-time non-tenure-track and tenure-track colleagues. In making this claim, I stand in opposition to the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals majority's assessment in *Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit v. NLRB* that "the dissent errs by asserting that adjuncts are somehow more like non-faculty employees than they are like faculty" (836), and in agreement with the dissenting opinion that "the terms of employment of adjuncts make clear that they are not necessarily equivalent to the permanent faculty" (842). May, June, and July are professionals, yes, but professionals organized under both bureaucratic rules and supervisory fiat that may previously have been unexpected outside the context of low-skill work (Hodson) but which are now increasingly relevant within higher education's contingent ranks, especially for adjuncts.

May, June, and July are faculty in a nominal sense, but in many other senses exist separately from the "real" faculty in terms of job description, performing unbundled aspects of the traditional full-time role for a cut-rate wage. And in terms of rights to due process, access to levers of governance, or expectations of academic freedom, they have more in common with app-based drivers and delivery workers than their full-time faculty colleagues down the hall. It is instructive that descriptions of the gig economy and conditions for gig- platform workers (United States House Committee on Small Business; Weil) transfer so effortlessly into the discourse about adjunct faculty (Tolley; Kezar et al.). Gig workers often lack due process or grievance rights by dint of their classification,

rightly or wrongly, as contractors or service-providers employed for brief and self-contained projects (Maffie and Elias), just as adjuncts often lack rights afforded to their full-time colleagues.

As Edwards and Tolley (“Do unions help adjuncts?”) note of higher education more generally, the purpose of these institutions to “develop skilled, thoughtful citizens capable of contributing in meaningful ways to society [...] will never be realized with a professoriate composed predominantly of instructors who work without the protection of real academic freedom, and have no role in shared governance, no job security, no benefits, low wages, and no real hope of ever finding a full-time position” (n.p.). Above and beyond that general purpose, Urban Catholic University and other institutions place before themselves an additional burden to meet the letter *and* spirit of their mission statements, which tend to include professions of Catholic identity as well as calls to apply Catholic wisdom to culture and scholarship, model fidelity to the Gospel within the Catholic tradition, serve church and community to alleviate suffering, and explore and transmit Catholic heritage and culture (Estanek et al. 203). Regardless of mission, “the financial decisions of Catholic colleges and universities often end up in tension with their commitments to the dignity of work and workers” (Herr et al. 70). According to the participants in my study—whose frustrations we should understand in the context of their institution but also in light of the fact that religiously-affiliated employers like Urban Catholic have broad, perhaps growing, leeway to ignore the labor and employment rights of their employees (Garden)—their university has failed in its commitment to the dignity of its own adjunct workforce.

Notes

¹ Much literature of Catholic Social Teaching centers the experiences of “man” or “men.” Reproduction of quotations without amendment to gendered, exclusive terms does not indicate approval of this usage.

² Approved by the University of New Hampshire Institutional Review Board (reference #8106).

³ I refer to the institution and participants using pseudonyms. “Urban Catholic University” is a Catholic Church-affiliated university in the northeast United States of America.

⁴ Whereas Hodson uses the term “co-worker relationships” I use “sociability.”

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Reconceptualizing the Academic Community for More Inclusive Knowledge Advancement: Breaking the Divide Between Academic and Non-Academic Staff

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Abstract

This article takes the collective character of knowledge advancement in institutions of higher education as a starting point to critically examine the predominant understanding of the academic community. The authors make a case for a reconceptualization of the academic community as a community of experts devoted to the advancement of knowledge, regardless of whether they conduct academic research or not. Such reconceptualization will lead to higher work efficiency and satisfaction among all staff and positively contribute to their well-being. This reconceptualization identifies a number of factors that currently undermine the communal and collective aspects of knowledge advancement, such as the diffusion of New Public Management practices, entanglement in professional hierarchies, competition for scarce financial resources, and lack of career incentives for cross-unit collaboration. An overview of existing responses to these challenges shows that they are insufficient for creating a sustainable and relatable sense of community among employees of higher education institutions. In response, the authors suggest interventions on an individual, institutional and policy level, including unionizing and reframing the work of academic and non-academic staff as centered on shared goals and values, which provides opportunities for exchange.

Alicja Rybkowska holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy. While her initial research focus was modern art and the interdependence of art and philosophy as well as the social and cultural consequences of this relation, in recent years she has moved to more socially oriented work. In 2020-2021 she worked as a rationality trainer and

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It is undisputed that advancing knowledge is a collective effort. It is also uncontroversial to claim that this effort typically—though not exclusively—takes place within institutions of higher education and that knowledge advancement is one of their most important goals.¹ However, the attempts to specify how to pursue this goal, for what reasons precisely, and how this pursuit is influenced by its collective nature are less uncontroversial and become increasingly subject to critical discussion. Our paper contributes to such critical discussion by (1) showing how the collective aspect of knowledge advancement within higher education institutions is often either altogether neglected or unnecessarily constricted in literature on higher education, (2) explaining why this is detrimental to the academic community, and (3) suggesting some practical solutions to this problem.

The concept of academic community is central for this piece of writing. The main contribution of our paper lies in the reconceptualization of the academic community so that it includes more actors than only scholars. We understand the academic community as a community of experts devoted to the advancement of knowledge, with equally relevant roles and responsibilities. In the text, we will discuss this community as comprised of both academic staff (i.e. those engaged primarily with teaching and/or research duties, including graduate student workers) and non-academic staff (i.e. administrators, technicians, support and professional service staff) affiliated to higher education institutions (OECD, *Benchmarking Higher Education System Performance*). However, we distance ourselves from the professional hierarchies that this distinction between academic and non-academic work implies. We are convinced that mutuality, collegiality and solidarity are crucial for the whole community to thrive. We are critical of the dominant discourse on higher education institutions, which presents them primarily as engines of economic growth and concentrates mainly on the institutional,

depersonalized interconnections between various market players. In that discourse, knowledge is no longer pursued but produced; the commodity replaces the community. Barnett points to the poverty of the language used in public debate about the roles and future of higher education institutions: they need to be “entrepreneurial” organizations functioning in the “globalized world,” ensuring “knowledge transfer” and “innovation” to its benefit (Gibbs and Barnett 10). However, the debate on their political and economic roles obscures the ethical and societal dimensions of their existence. Barnett suggests constructing a “counter-vocabulary that includes terms such as social engagement, public benefits, public goods, gender, rights and citizenship” (Gibbs and Barnett 10). A redefined concept of academic community seems to be an indispensable, if currently underestimated, part of such a vocabulary.

We believe such a perspective is necessary if institutions of higher education wish to further realize their “third mission,” especially in its social and cultural aspect, which has been overshadowed by an economic agenda (Chatterton). In addition to knowledge and technology transfer—i.e. activities through which higher education institutions generate economic impact—they can provide broader societal and cultural impacts through continuing education, sharing resources and facilities with the community, outreach, and volunteering (Godonoga and Sarrico). Clark quotes Hesburgh on the paradoxical status of higher education institutions: they are conservative and saturated in tradition but at the same time they have a unique power to initiate social changes (Clark, *The Higher Education System* 182). The outlook for change is also inscribed in the set of terms typically used when discussing the role of higher education. Especially today, scholars are expected to face “grand” pressing challenges, experience “major breakthroughs,” and make “ground-breaking” discoveries. Nonetheless, if they are to pursue “frontier” research, they need to be backed by the community. It is impossible to be drivers of social change when there is little or no support from colleagues, both individual and organized in the form of work unions. We argue that this support needs to transcend traditional divisions between academic and non-academic staff and we show how it can be guided by the ideal of mutual learning.

As an author duo, we represent exactly the sort of collaboration with colleagues from the extended academic community that we are arguing for: we are both at the beginning of our careers at a public Austrian university, having recently completed a PhD (Alicja) or planning to do so soon (Ana). However, while Ana represents the *wissenschaftliches Personal* (or scientific staff), Alicja belongs to the *allgemeines Personal* (general staff; each has its own workers’ council and its own collective bargaining agreement). For that reason, us ever collaborating on an academic paper was quite unlikely. In the paper, we name multiple arguments why this division is disadvantageous for both groups and detrimental to the mission of academic institutions. We also discuss

solutions that would help make such collaboration an established practice rather than an opportune coincidence.

Both the arguments and solutions that we present are influenced by our positionality and reflect our own experiences of being a member of the academic community within the European Higher Education Area. We often find ourselves intertwined in the conformation of professional hierarchies, academic disciplines, service units and career development strategies. Alicja has received her doctoral training in Central Europe, where being a doctoral candidate means both prestige and precarity and involves such dubious practices as unpaid teaching assignments. She had the opportunity to start working on her dissertation while still in her master studies thanks to a special ministerial grant. Having started her own research projects very early, she also got disappointed with the reality of scholarly work early on and decided not to pursue further a research career after receiving her PhD. Ana is currently pursuing her PhD and has both research and teaching duties. Belonging to the lowest category of academic staff (i.e. a pre-doc position), she has observed the hierarchical nature of the academic environment and the uncertain job prospects experienced by peers at her level and in post-doc positions. Opportunities to advance in an academic role have become more competitive over time, and largely depend on one's research track record in top journals. Excellent teaching and engagement with society are secondary.

Moreover, results from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills show that higher education provides less stable job opportunities to young doctorate holders, compared to other employment sectors (OECD, *Benchmarking Higher Education System Performance*). This makes the academic career less attractive for PhD holders, who either switch to a non-academic position or leave universities altogether.

Identifying the problem

As indicated in the introduction, the dominant discourse on higher education tends to focus on the role that knowledge advancement plays for national economies and policy-making. Interpersonal relations within higher education institutions are rarely discussed outside the managerial context that focuses on the relations between academic and non-academic staff.² Any arising conflicts or personal struggles are seen as threats to the overall performance of the institution and not as a threat to the cohesion of the academic community. In a passage characteristic for such an approach, Clark writes:

For a university to be entrepreneurial, it needs to acquire the right kind of organization, one that allows the institution to go on changing itself and adapting effectively to a changing society, one that allows its groups and individuals to become more effective than previously. (...) Structures are inescapable, but they can be made into ones that liberate [sic!], that tutor groups and

individuals in how to be smart [sic!] about change. (*Sustaining Change in Universities* 174)

From such a perspective, the discontents of academic work are concerning only insofar as they affect the performance of academic staff and their readiness to participate in administrative and organizational tasks. Bess and Dee thus formulate it: “when workers are constrained (or feel they are constrained [sic!]) by tight deadlines and work schedules, there is little opportunity or incentive to explore potential improvements in strategy, structure, and operation in the organization” (120).

The academic-administrative divide has been a persistent challenge in contemporary higher education institutions (Szekeres). The diffusion of New Public Management practices in public sector organizations (Ferlie et al.) transformed tertiary schools into organizational actors (Koryakina et al.; Krücken and Meier) and gave rise to academic and knowledge capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoades; Olssen and Peters) and managerialism (McCarthy and Dragouni) in higher education institutions. The emphasis shifted to accountability to the public purse and efficiency and effectiveness of operations (Pollitt and Bouckaert), while the increasing casualization of work is explained by state budget cuts. Ever since, institutions of higher education have been adopting corporate practices, such as mission statements, organizational strategies, and performance management tools (Guenther and Schmidt) to monitor the quality of research and teaching.

Quality monitoring has gone from a model of collegial peer review to a managerial approach that involves performance targets and staff appraisal exercises. Meanwhile, the labor (i.e., faculty) and management (i.e., administration) perspectives on quality in higher education are increasingly divergent and carry different values (Worthen and Berry). In this transition, research excellence and scientific impact have become the currency to succeed and progress in an academic role (Bowl and Hughes). This “publish or perish” culture creates disincentives for collaboration and leaves little room for more multidisciplinary, inclusive, and participatory knowledge advancement models (Nowotny et al.).

Recurring testimonies of discrimination, disrespect, and distrust in higher education testify to the tensions and frustrations stemming from such managerial approaches (Keashly and Neuman; Lester et al.; Pyke). For example, evidence from the Changing Academic Profession international survey points to a deterioration of working conditions for academic staff (OECD, *Benchmarking Higher Education System Performance*). Examinations of scholarly life reveal that high demands of research and didactics are not paired with sufficient guidance and community support (Kinman; Berg et al.; McKenzie).

Efforts to improve working conditions in higher education often lack coordination, even though unionizing in this sector, as in any other,

could arguably empower their employees and increase standards of fairness and transparency (Rhoades, “Faculty unions, business models, and the academy’s future.”) These are especially relevant as growing dependence on external sources of financing continues to contribute to the precarious situation of both academic and non-academic workers. The casualization of academic labor demands a timely and uninterrupted transition from one project to another. This push for the continual output of intellectual labor has become a crucial expectation placed on those who work on temporary contracts or experience pay cuts. According to a 2016 report, contingent faculty (understood as both part- and full- time faculty who are appointed off the tenure track, AAUP) have substituted for tenure or tenure-track faculty in most types of American institutions (Hurlburt and McGarrath). Only a privileged core of employees do not need to worry about the consistency of their employment and compensation. For the precarious peripheries, the temporality of employment becomes a permanent state (Newfield; Shulman). However, with growing shares of non-standard employment (OECD, *Resourcing Higher Education: Challenges, Choices and Consequences*), such as subcontracted or outsourced work, even this contingent situation might appear like a privilege. As an effect, professional hierarchies become intertwined with hierarchies of usefulness, applicability, and monetization (Han). This results in a highly stressful, competitive, and exclusive work environment that by no means fosters a sense of solidarity and mutual trust, which are essential for building sustainable communities. Such work conditions can seriously distort collaboration, which is necessary in virtually all aspects of knowledge advancement, and poses serious perils to the quality of the higher education provision (OECD, *Resourcing Higher Education: Challenges, Choices and Consequences*). They furthermore result in higher employee turnover rates and, consequently, inhibit the creation of lasting relationships between potential colleagues and between students and teachers.

These problems are by now so deeply inscribed in the academic work that they became the sole focus of the annual International Conference on the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Postgraduate Researchers, organized for the first time in May 2019 in Brighton. Although it is an overall praiseworthy effort to address the burning issue of the emotional challenges that researchers face in their work, the psychological, practice-oriented approach of the congress largely ignored the parallel need to create a meaningful and compelling narrative that could help to restore the sense of community among academic and non-academic staff and to counteract the negative effects of continuous competition and uncertainty.

Alongside counseling and coaching being made available to academic staff to increase their resilience and tolerance to failure, recognizing the detrimental effects of insufficient community support may

be pivotal in reconceptualizing, if not practically changing, contemporary higher education.

Narrow understanding of knowledge advancement restricts it to research (knowledge expansion) and—less frequently—teaching (knowledge transmission). However, both teaching and research rely on support from experts who are not directly involved in these activities but nevertheless have expertise in such relevant fields as curriculum design, educational technology, quality assurance, education policy, technology transfer, or research management. During the past few decades, the proportion of these experts increased in several countries, including Norway (Gornitzka and Larsen) and Denmark (Stage and Aagaard). In some systems, such as Australia (Croucher and Woelert), the US (Rhoades, “Envisioning invisible workforces: enhancing intellectual capital”) and the UK (Gibbs and Kharouf; OECD, *Benchmarking Higher Education System Performance*), more than half of staff employed in institutions of higher education are support and professional service staff (i.e. non-academic). Their work as “blended professionals” (Whitchurch), which often spans both the academic and policy domains, adds value to the core functions of tertiary schools. For example, evidence points to a positive relationship between the size of the administrative body and research performance (Andrews et al.). A similar positive relationship was found with respect to educational performance (Baltaru; Rutherford). Professional service staff were likewise found to have a positive influence on the development of academic networks (Qu) and the acquisition of research funds (Ito and Watanabe).

Despite the value that these experts bring to higher education institutions, they often express feeling invisible (Akerman) and facing limited opportunities for career development and progression when compared to their academic counterparts. Moreover, professional service staff remain an insufficiently-researched category of employees in higher education, with data collection being largely focused on academic staff and institutional leadership (Bossu et al.). The studies that have been conducted point to issues related to job satisfaction (Bauer), career development (Gander), and relationships with academics (Szekeres). Their role in knowledge advancement, however, has not been sufficiently addressed in the literature.

Even though many of them have obtained a master’s or even a doctoral degree (Ryttberg and Geschwind) and often have a deep understanding of academic culture, they are generally confined to their status as “non-academic” staff and often perceived as foreign to the mission of higher education institutions. Rogers and Schofield stress that “it is rare to find examples outside of higher education of organizations which categorize a substantial part of their workforce by reference to what they are not” and they demonstrate how this focus on structures and hierarchies, rather than objectives and outcomes, impairs the advancement of knowledge. Furthermore, these hierarchies are also a form of

discriminatory abuse leading to the marginalization and depreciation of professional service staff (Rogers and Schofield). These staffers are often excluded from bargaining unions that tend to reinforce the divide between academic and other professional staff. While unionization rates among academic staff are growing (see for instance the Higher Ed Labor United initiative in the US), as is the scholarship on this subject (see for instance Cain), there are little efforts both on the practical and theoretical level to highlight that at least some of the interests of academic and non-academic staff are shared and therefore could be better protected in a coordinated effort. The sense of community that we are arguing for is also incomplete when collective action is missing.

There is too little recognition in higher education institutions that learning opportunities are multifaceted and often unexpected, and may well go beyond encounters with academic colleagues. Pasque notes upon a critical analysis of the organizational discourses in American universities and colleges that

...we reject any forms of resistance to our ideas as though alternative perspectives force us to choose. The complexities of the issues and shades of gray are absent. We end up demonizing the person who attempts to resist our ideas, or the original idea itself, rather than perceiving it as an opportunity to consider multiple perspectives. We often hold tight to our worldviews rather than considering a reshaping of the original form. (164–165)

Reflecting on these hierarchies of power, Cohn discusses how collaboration between academic and non-academic employees is often systematically discouraged: joint projects are not considered in employee evaluations and do not count as academic achievement; the two groups are spatially divided, occupying separate rooms, if not buildings; and the notion persists that while researchers could do their work without expert support, the experts working at higher education institutions depend on the existence of researchers to be able to perform their tasks. However, the expertise of non-academic employees is more broadly applicable than just within the higher education context and they could also find occupations elsewhere. Their work is complementary, not ancillary, to the scholarly work of academics. Appreciation of this fact is crucial if we really want to prioritize knowledge advancement as the main goal of tertiary schools. Focusing on the shared mission rather than on diverse ways to get there helps to create a sustainable, resilient community, and such a community might be a form of resistance against neoliberal trends discussed above.

Existing responses to the problem

Historically, universities were established as communities of teachers and students, and their protective function was as important as their

educational role. Similar to guilds of other professions, *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* helped teachers and students collectively defend their interests before local municipal or ecclesiastical officials and to secure certain privileges (Ridder- Symoens 20). Early universities also attracted a number of people who were not directly involved in studying but were under universities' authority and could benefit from their protection (39): beadles, messengers, scribes, and booksellers (126–129). Some of them were required to demonstrate a certain level of academic qualification in order to be allowed to perform their tasks. Thus, universities were from the very beginning networks of people whose level of involvement in the advancement of knowledge varied, but who were nevertheless united around that shared goal. They were also free to join the community (provided that they were granted admission) in order to do so in a protected environment.

Contemporary networks and associations offering support to institutions interested in community engagement differ in scale (from local, such as the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement in the UK, to global, such as the Talloires Network of Engaged Universities or the Principles for Responsible Management Education network) and aims, but they do recognize the special role of higher education institutions in society and the personal commitment it takes to play this role effectively. Apart from established organizations, there are also numerous informal actions and movements that unite scholars, non-scholar experts, and students worldwide. Higher education labor is increasingly organizing: the last few years brought about mass protests against marketization of higher education in Austria (Uni Brennt, 2009) and in Great Britain (Demolition, 2010; another series of strikes against privatization of universities in 2018). In 2018, the new act on higher education in Poland sparked a series of occupational strikes and demonstrations. In a spontaneous reaction to the reform, Akademicki Komitet Protestacyjny (Academic Protesting Committee) was formed by academics and students from several institutions. Their biggest concern was the introduction of governing boards that would consist of people not affiliated with the university, which they saw as a threat to the autonomy of universities. In 2019, institutions worldwide joined the Elsevier boycott, criticizing the provider for undermining the communal aspect of science and denying access to knowledge to less-wealthy institutions. In the same year, over 100,000 people (mostly students and educators) joined protests in Brazil triggered by cuts in education spending and postgraduate scholarships. In 2020 in Hungary, the privatization of the University of Theater and Film Arts and the reorganization of its board under a close associate of Viktor Orbán led to protests against the increasing government control over higher education, and students occupied the premises of the university from August until September, when distance learning was introduced as a COVID-19 containment measure. In January 2021, the appointment of the new rector of Boğaziçi University raised

concerns about Erdoğan's government interfering with academic freedom and was followed by several protests; as a result, the incumbent rector had to resign and was followed by another controversial figure with close links to the government. At the end of 2022, 48,000 academic workers of the University of California started a protest against wages that are disproportionately low in relation to the costs of living in the urban areas where UC campuses are located. Their nearly six-weeks long strike, described as the largest strike ever in the US higher education system, was concluded with a ratification of an agreement between the university and the bargaining unions. Around the same time, the New York's New School untenured adjunct professors and lecturers, constituting almost 90% of the faculty, joined a walkout that led to canceling nearly all classes for three weeks and, consequently, brought about a tentative collective bargaining agreement to improve their working conditions.

At the first glance, we could roughly divide these practices into two types of initiatives: those concentrating on calculated efforts to realize a common goal (e.g., preserving the excellence of work) and those concentrating on spontaneous resistance against common threats. We argue that both types are unsatisfactory, the first being too broad and the second being too particularized to foster a positive, consistent and autonomous course of action, which is necessary to induce sustainable changes within higher education institutions. Instead of adopting the perspective of threats and efforts, we would like to suggest the perspective of enrichment and show how members of the broadly understood academic community can meaningfully and mutually support each other in their work and contribute collectively to knowledge advancement.

If the feelings of solidarity with other members of the community appear only in face of external threats to the community, they result in short-lived protests, but often cease to exist once the threats are eliminated. Therefore, solidarity stemming from external threats is too incidental to result in a lasting, profound change to the conditions of work in higher education. Furthermore, the triggers of the protests described above, such as restrictions on academic freedom, underfinancing research, or using funding schemes to shape the direction of research, as concerning as they are, are mostly relevant for academic staff, while non-academic employees might be less incentivized to join such protests.

Similarly, if the precarious conditions of work are the source of solidarity, then those occupying top tiers in the hierarchy are unlikely to identify with such a community of interests. Solidarity thus becomes overly selective and may result in further divides. Finally, if threats intrinsic to the scholarly work, such as the unmitigable risk of erring and the retractability of scientific theories should be the source of academic solidarity, then it excludes a large part of the community that is not directly engaged in the pursuit of knowledge.

However, a broader institutional framework also does not suffice to create a prolonged and extended sense of solidarity. Apart from

professional goals, all members of the community bring with them their personal ambitions. The advancement of knowledge, even if it is one of the most important missions of higher education institutions, may not be an imperative for all their employees. The realization of a universal and common goal, hinted at in the very name of a “university,” seems to be too fuzzy to be appealing. This echoes Rorty’s seminal work on solidarity, in which he criticized applying metaphysical universalism to the concept of solidarity. He suggested that “our sense of solidarity is the strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as ‘one of us,’ where ‘us’ means something smaller and more local than the human race.” If sharing a common goal (deepening our knowledge of the world or correcting our previous misconceptions of how it functions) is the impulse to create a community, it is not clear how this goal could effectively withstand numerous, often conflicting goals of particular members of the community.

What can still be done

After critical investigations into the existing instances of community building in higher education institutions, it is due time to conclude them with a proposal that would help remedy the challenges discussed in the preceding section. It should not be purely negative (community uniting against something), but it should also be flexible enough not to rely solely on one commonly shared goal, since identifying such a goal within a diverse, international community is not feasible. The goals of the academic community should not be too specific so that they remain relatable and appealing for differing individuals but they cannot be too vague if they are still to be generally desirable.

Recognition of both a common position (shaped by external and internal hazards) and a common effort to deliver outcomes despite these threats is the first step in the process of reconstructing a frame for the academic community. The second step, after accounting for shared characteristics, is to deliberate how they can be best shared and harnessed to community building. Collaboration between academic and professional service staff is crucial in establishing a community around knowledge advancement, which becomes a more inclusive and participatory endeavor. Such collaboration acknowledges and respects the contributions of different members. Evidence suggests that the relations between these two groups can be nourished through frequent joint meetings (Ryttberg and Geschwind) and engaging professional service staff in the education of students (Cox and Verbaan). Professional service staff are also often engaged in delivering formal education to academics on policy trends that have implications for research, such as research data management (Joo and Schmidt), or science communication. The interaction of these two groups through professional education is deemed beneficial. Furthermore, members of the professional service staff are often part of networks that can provide access to various forms of social and financial capital.

However, as Rhoades points out, members of the academic staff are generally unaware of these resources and sides of managerial professionals (“Envisioning invisible workforces: enhancing intellectual capital”). This collaboration is likewise critical and can mitigate the negative effects of working under pressure in a highly hierarchical environment where professional values are increasingly under threat by market forces.

The solution we propose is to identify for the academic community one umbrella objective that unites their manifold goals, incorporates their plans and hopes, and allows the discussion, negotiation, and realization their ambitions. Not all ideals of work are commonly shared, but one could be: that of mutual learning for knowledge advancement. Higher education offers institutionalized spaces of learning, which have been created for the very purpose of knowledge acquisition, be it by the way of study, research, discussion, or experiment, and they have retained this purpose up to this day. The understanding of this purpose, however, is evolving and sensitive to personal values. Hence, the lofty language of “deepening knowledge,” “intellectual exploration,” and “personal development” as we know it from higher education institutions’ self-presentations is often not relatable enough to develop a sense of belonging to a community and the readiness to contribute to the welfare of its members. Mutual learning for the well-being of oneself and of others, on the other hand, covers nearly all possible personal objectives while remaining faithful to the ideal of higher education. In its capacity to include various goals of various people, it has the potential to become the source of meaningful joint efforts to advance the good of the academic community. It also offers ways for delicate activism and subtle contestation of existing power relations in academia and its market orientation (Kaplan and Davidoff). As Berg and Seeber note, “because research is what gains most visibility in the current university, it offers a particularly fertile site for resistance. We can choose how we talk about our scholarship to each other and more publicly” (58). It is again noteworthy that external communications about research, and the image of higher education institutions that they convey, are the shared responsibility of academic and non-academic staff. In the conscious act of making their work accessible to others, they can also strengthen their self-understanding as members of one learning community.

By “mutual learning” we do not mean the concept of life-long learning that reinforces the precarity of academic life by disposing workers to constantly acquire new skills to remain employable. This is an individualistic perspective boosted by the meritocratic discourse present on campuses. We suggest adopting the perspective of the community in which work goals and work cultures are not artificially separated. By mutual learning, we mean a commitment to the intellectual development and well-being of others, which means offering them as much support in their intellectual pursuits as we would expect ourselves. When I expect the university to be a place where I can flourish, then I must strive to make it

such a place for others as well. bell hooks noted in *Teaching to Transgress* that “if professors are wounded, damaged individuals, people who are not self-actualized, then they will seek asylum in the academy rather than seek to make the academy a place of challenge, dialectical interchange, and growth” (165). A good starting point is an examination of one’s own expectations: What kind of support do I hope for? What kind of actions do I find necessary? Which are institutionally embedded and which are more personal? Which are accessible to me as an engaged actor?

The sense of community and solidarity among academic and non-academic staff is something they choose, not something imposed upon them. Membership in a community is only meaningful when contributions to the community are voluntary and deliberate. However, with the typical academic workload and number of responsibilities required to work within higher education, choosing to grow one’s community may seem to be one more task to tackle. Not everybody has the resources for such intellectual and emotional generosity. Even if we arrive at certain conclusions upon the examination of our own expectations of academia, the questions remain: Could I offer similar support to my colleagues? Do I have the time and the capacity to do it? Am I fine with the aspect of activism and resistance that it entails? Can I hope for reciprocity?

From a policy perspective, solidarity and collaboration for knowledge advancement can be facilitated through funding instruments for research. Research funding programs need to place stronger emphasis on societal impact, multidisciplinary, collaborative work, open access, and the participation of a wider range of stakeholders in defining and implementing research agendas. Such attempts are already visible in several initiatives, including Horizon Europe, the Community-University Research Alliance program in Canada, the Knowledge Exchange Framework in the UK, and the National Science Foundation’s Broader Impacts initiative in the US. These initiatives may indirectly forge closer relations between academic and non-academic staff. For instance, the latter can support the former by writing research proposals that incorporate societal- and scientific-impact. Non-academic staff could also play an important role in science communication and research dissemination activities.

From an institutional point of view, that could also mean creating trade unions for both academic and non-academic staff. Framing the university, not as a distinguished social institution that has a significant mission, but first and foremost as a workplace, offers a rich ground for change and reform that could further reinforce the sense of solidarity. Such an organizational structure stays in line with the perspective of enrichment we propose, which essentially involves the question of what one can do to make the work of others in their environment safer and more satisfying. When higher education institutions tend to advance moral statements about their own position in order to mystify their corporate agenda, a truly moral statement would be to unite and question this agenda and to

propose—and test—alternatives. Creating favorable conditions for exchange between academic and non-academic staff, both through top-down and bottom-up initiatives, would already present a refreshing alternative to the hierarchical structure that prevails in higher education.

Another area of much needed institutional reform refers to doctoral education, given the crucial role it plays in socializing young scholars into the academic community. Doctoral education needs to place more emphasis on multidisciplinary, collaboration, and the role of collective work in the advancement of useful knowledge. Similarly, doctoral education, mirroring the characteristics of the academic community, needs to move away from an obsession with publication counts, and instead create learning opportunities for the advancement of socially impactful research. Therefore, young scholars need to be exposed to training opportunities that address more collective models of knowledge development (such as collaborative or community-driven research) and learn how to disseminate this knowledge beyond academia so that it reaches and benefits a wider audience.

Conclusion

Recognizing that opportunities for learning are multifaceted and often unexpected, we want to conclude by making a strong case for collaboration that is unrestricted by professional and disciplinary divides. We believe that both academic and non-academic workers have the knowledge, skills, and experiences to enrich and inform the work of their colleagues, and to make higher education institutions places where both ideas and people can flourish. The perspective of enrichment is not aiming at success because its effects are unmeasurable. It is nevertheless, we believe, worth trying to make others' work richer, more rewarding, and more compelling—not least because it can make our own work more satisfying. The practical examples of trade unions or funding schemes given above demonstrate that efforts to strengthen the academic community do not need to be charitable actions but that they do have the potential to change one's own work experience for the better. These examples also demonstrate that systemic change is required to attain the vision of a more inclusive and collaborative academic community that we advocate in this paper. At the system level, policies and funding instruments emphasizing diversity, open science, multidisciplinary, and societal impact, have the power to foster more collaborative spaces of knowledge advancement in higher education institutions. At the institutional level, unions and incentive structures can serve as strong levers of change. Moving from a “publish or perish” reward system towards one that values collaborative and co-created research, knowledge exchange, science dissemination, teaching innovation, and societal engagement is urgently needed to align policy ambitions with individual actions. In the end, inclusivity, collaboration, and reciprocity are ideals for any work environment, not only academic, and it offers an answer to the

threats typical in the academic field. Even if the ideal is unattainable for higher education institutions, it lies within the reach of individuals building the institution.

Notes

¹ In this study, the term higher education comprises “all types of studies, training or training for research at the post-secondary level, provided by universities or other educational establishments that are approved as institutions of higher education by the competent state authorities” (UNESCO, “World declaration on higher education for the twenty-first century: Vision and action” 1).

² See for instance Lewis and Altbach; Bess and Dee; Del Favero and Bray.

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Review of Derek Bok's *Higher Expectations: Can Colleges Teach Students What They Need to Know in the 21st Century?*

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Bok, Derik. *Higher Expectations: Can Colleges Teach Students What They Need to Know in the 21st Century?* Princeton UP, 2020.

The weakness of student learning in American colleges and universities and the need for improvement have been preoccupations, if not obsessions, of critics of higher education since the 1980s. A succession of reports and initiatives by government commissions, educational agencies, states, and foundations have addressed this alleged problem. Initially, most focused on improving teaching. After 2000, “engagement” was promoted as a key to stimulate greater learning. State legislators have applied financial rewards or punishments in the form of performance-based funding. And a commission appointed by President George W. Bush advocated measuring and publicizing each institution’s learning score to induce competitive pressures. These efforts have produced some reform in practices, but the results are more equivocal. Still, the large earnings premium accorded college graduates would seem to indicate some intrinsic value to their studies.

Derek Bok has long championed this cause. President of Harvard from 1971-1991, and again from 2006-2007, he has long had a unique stature as a spokesperson on higher education. *Higher Expectations*, written in his ninetieth year, is his third volume devoted to student learning in addition to the extensive coverage in his magnum opus, *Higher Education in America*. Improving undergraduate education has been a consistent concern of Boks’ and, as with most writers in this genre, so has criticism of professors for remaining impervious. Bok devoted his first presidential speech to the Harvard faculty to the subject of undergraduate

teaching, but a senior professor later confided that three quarters of the faculty “gave up on me entirely when I announced the subject” (viii). Nearly fifty years later, Bok acknowledges the same obstacles to teaching students “what they need to know,” but now explores ways to overcome it (177).

Bok’s writings are characterized by an implacable reasonableness, recognition of all sides of issues, honest consideration of contrary arguments, and qualified or tentative resolutions. Besides drawing on his incomparable personal experience, he also incorporates the most recent and credible academic research. *Higher Expectations* differs from his earlier writings in being predicated on an external project—the extensive reform proposals developed by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU)—*College Learning for the New Global Century* (2007). Funded by several foundations, this project consulted representatives of employers, government, and universities to develop a consensus on “essential learning outcomes” (18). It then compiled further reports on how colleges might achieve them. Bok, with out-of-character hyperbole, calls this initiative “the most ambitious attempt in over one-hundred years to reform American undergraduate education . . . [and] the nearest approximation ever produced of a consensus among academic leaders, reform-minded professors, employers and public officials” (20). The AACU recommended comprehensive changes that would require “new courses, widespread redesign of existing courses, and innovative methods of instruction” (20-21).

The AACU learning outcomes barely acknowledge the academic substance of higher education. Rather, they emphasize “intellectual and practical skills,” “personal and social responsibility,” and “integrative and applied learning.” (18-19) In *Higher Expectations* Bok subjects these learning outcomes to critical scrutiny, weighing alleged benefits against criticism and obstacles. The final chapters consider implementation and basically endorse these innovations and the rejiggering needed to pursue these goals.

Should universities embrace the goal of educating citizens? If so, they do a lamentable job. Bok suggests a required course on civic education covering how government works in the United States, issues of public policy, and fundamental principles of justice, among other things. Together with other electives, civic education might also be expected to enhance critical thinking, media literacy (skepticism?), and appreciation of diversity. A similar goal would have all students acquire intercultural competence through some form of international studies. Given that these latter fields are “so vast and continually changing,” no specific courses should be required (56). At best, students might be guided to electives that complement their interests.

Both these recommendations are rife with uncritical thinking. Can universities instill civic responsibility while teaching American history as a concatenation of injustices? And any invocation of “global” (learning,

citizenship, problems) is impossibly inclusive. The other learning outcomes avoid such confounding realities by aiming to affect only personal behavior.

Bok would have colleges strive to strengthen the character of their students—to develop greater conscientiousness, higher standards of ethical behavior, and greater personal responsibility. Next, they could help students find purpose and meaning in life. Interpersonal abilities could be bolstered through teaching people skills, teamwork, and interracial understanding. Intrapersonal skills might be honed by enhancing creativity, inclinations for lifelong learning, and perseverance and resilience. Perhaps, he suggests, colleges should teach meditation and happiness psychology as well.

The chief obstacle to this vision is the university. Universities are organized to teach subject matter, academic and professional. They are organized into schools and departments based on subject specialization, and they carefully select faculty for their expertise in those fields. Hence, Bok repeatedly notes that faculty are not trained to teach personal development topics and in fact resist suggestions that they should. Nor are students likely to welcome instruction in “what they need to know in the 21st century” (177). College students choose the subjects they want or need to study, and in fact are almost universally skeptical of required ‘gen-ed’ courses.

Personal behaviors constitute an entirely different dimension from curricula. Many involve psychology’s Big Five personality traits—conscientiousness, openness, agreeableness, and extroversion (the fifth trait is neuroses). These are substantially inherited dispositions, but Bok assures us that research has shown that they can be modified (are “teachable”) in young adults. More problematic is how students would react to mandatory efforts to modify their personal selves. Granted, there would appear to be much room for improvement (the premise of this book) but given the enormous range of personality traits—virtues and deficiencies—it is difficult to imagine instruction that would be effective or appropriate for all. Bok cites studies that find positive outcomes from instruction in moral reasoning, citizenship, etc. His basic argument is that these behaviors involve “habits, skills, and qualities of mind that might be improved through . . . capable instruction” (137).

Addressing personal behaviors has been largely consigned to non-faculty staff in student affairs and counseling, where it has been random and fragmented. Rather, Bok has faith that expanded educational research can establish the effectiveness of learning innovations, even though “the quality and rigor” of existing studies “tend to be weak” (156). Nevertheless, throughout the book he advises that innovations should not be required or implemented until research has proven their efficacy. However, despite widespread public endorsement of developmental learning outcomes and promising preliminary initiatives, the prospect of support from tenure-track faculty is hopeless. Instead, Bok recommends

the creation of a separate teaching faculty. It might be argued that this has largely occurred through the substantial cadres of non-tenure track faculty now employed. However, they are primarily academics manque, whose insecure positions create incentives for keeping students entertained (engaged), not challenging them. Bok envisages “a carefully selected, full-time teaching faculty primarily for the first two years of college,” who, as secure faculty members, could “devote more time and effort to improving the quality of [teaching] . . . to new developments in teaching and curriculum and spend[ing] more time experimenting with innovative methods of instruction” (167-8).

Wishful thinking. Realistically, a separate teaching faculty is a fundamentally bad idea. Where it has been tried (usually with the blessing of research-minded faculty) invidious distinctions between the two classes of faculty have been a source of much unhappiness. It seems most appropriate for developmentally challenged students, but it would be likely to alienate the academically able. Opportunity costs would be substantial—for universities, hiring teachers with developmental training instead of promising scholars, as well as the higher costs of small classes; for students, Bok suggests foregoing the opportunity for electives from their finite course lists.

Defining the aims of higher education in terms of “essential learning outcomes,” if pushed to logical extremes, would seem to lead to dubious results. The AAC&U agenda is predicated on stakeholders’ image of what they would like higher education to be, not the realities of American undergraduate education. Since 2000, concerted efforts to improve teaching have taken root in higher education, as Bok acknowledges. A large proportion of aspiring professors have sought pedagogical training and now employ more effective approaches in their teaching. Universities have sought to embed intellectual skills into introductory courses. Many universities do in fact offer elective courses in happiness, wellness, and other subjects recommended by Bok in an entire chapter devoted to meditation and positive psychology. They resonate with the greater self-absorption of today’s students. And a majority of college students graduate in professional subjects that are designed to impart applications of knowledge and skills. The notable learning deficiencies that still plague American higher education are significantly due to inadequate academic preparation and market forces that encourage consumerism. *Higher Expectations* provides an exhaustive account of the possibilities and problems of expanding college education to incorporate personal development goals. But altering the academic structure of universities to achieve such ambiguous learning outcomes is a bridge too far. And we shouldn’t try to go there.



Review of Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!*

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Ahmed, Sara. *Complaint!* Duke UP, 2021.

There are things that we who labor in academic institutions know. We know these things from our unique positions on the hierarchy, which might be undermined or expanded as a result of who we are perceived to be. For those of us who labor on the lower rungs of that hierarchy and have managed to survive them long enough to remain, we know how things work and we know how those things might work against some and not others. Some of us have arrived and remain even as our bodies and histories were never anticipated by the institutional space and therefore struggle to fit in the space enough to remain (Sharpe 2016; McKittrick 2020). Others know things about academic institutions because we are among those who *were* anticipated by the institutional space—those who do not need signs saying that they are welcomed because it is known and assumed that this is already the case. *Complaint!* by Sara Ahmed (2021) describes how those differences come to matter by focusing on how complaints work as they are entangled with academic and social hierarchies alongside differently positioned bodies. She describes how policies, procedures, cultures, and complaints move around bodies and spaces, ultimately reproducing the same institutional hierarchies. Put differently, *Complaint!* details the massive waste of time, energy, and labor that marginalizes some to the benefit of others.

Complaint! pays attention to the utility of doors and how doors serve to maintain institutional hierarchies and violence. Doors are opened and closed in ways that align with how power is operationalized. Those who are meant to be kept in or out are done so by literal and figurative doors. The text is timely in that many academic institutions and other organizations are currently experiencing a demographic and culture shift: things that were permissible in the past have become less so and people who have behaved in ways that were widely tolerated now must reflect. There are mandates and commitments for equity, diversity, and inclusion—even if much of that is what Ahmed calls *non-performative*.

Many colleges and universities are prepared (under some duress) to allow historically excluded people into the building but have not yet been willing to address the culture, which is a social context that determines *how* work is done. And how work gets done is often in inequitable ways. Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!* clearly and convincingly names, describes, and analyzes how laboring bodies differently take up institutional space and how complaints arise in such a milieu and are often dismissed or weaponized against the complainant.

The book is an extension of some of the issues Ahmed takes up in previous work, which she refers to through the book. She does not just describe experiences that people have in institutions—experiences of normalized and widespread violence—but also how those experiences are the result of a cluster of norms that facilitate certain kinds of behavior and stop other kinds of behavior. She does this in such a way that attunes the reader to how differently bodies labor in academic institutional space—naming many of those differences as the outcome of institutional violence, “All of the chapters in this book are concerned, in one way or another, with institutional violence” (Ahmed 180). A strength of the text is that Ahmed refuses to consider that the culture, the norms, or the distribution of power is inevitable, and the price one pays for being included. The book is deeply critical of how power operates in institutions of higher education, but also in all the pages, one can see how it might become different.

In all four sections of the book Ahmed draws on a series of diverse and wide-ranging experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate students [students who already have one degree] and professors differently positioned on the academic hierarchy to discuss how institutions work by focusing on formal and informal complaints. Using a series of interviews, she details a variety of experiences with violence including discrimination, bullying, sexual harassment, mistreatment, and abuse. Some of the interviewees file formal complaints and some do not. All the people who experience abuses of power must labor in ways that are recognized by the institution. The labor is varied, but often results in painful and unsatisfying outcomes. Ahmed discusses the following:

1. The unpaid affective and emotional labor required when one experiences the event of harassment and/or a culture that normalizes harassment, even if one is not directly targeted.
2. The repetitive and exhausting labor required to navigate an institutional structure that is hostile to meaningfully responding to such harassment while also continuing the work required of the job that they are paid to do.
3. Finally, the labor of coping with the initial harassment or abuse alongside fresh abuse—being characterized in ways that limit access to resources, opportunity, mentorship, and physical space.

In detail Ahmed describes how this pattern happens to postgraduates, lecturers, and professors repeatedly and how those loops are produced by institutional culture and hierarchy. Some are entitled in ways that make

others vulnerable to violence and academic institutions are broadly unprepared to engage this unevenness. It is important to note that the interviewees included, people of color, women, queer, and trans people. The people interviewed are precariously positioned because they are not the people who are historically entrenched in the institutional structure. They have not made up the rules and must labor in ways to change the rules in order to be accommodated by the institution. Ahmed calls this *nonreproductive labor*. This is “the labor of trying to intervene in the reproduction of a problem” (163). The problem might be the absence of a clear policy; patterns of harassment and abuse; a culture of transphobia, racism, and misogyny; or a senior scholar abusing their power over junior people and/or students.

Nonreproductive labor is the labor of complaint. Ahmed describes other kinds of labor, including the labor of *not* complaining and how that can also activate the same disciplining behaviors that complaining might. In one example, a postgraduate student does not laugh at a sexist joke when everyone else laughs. In this non-action she identifies herself as not being aligned with the others who are laughing. She is then further harassed as a result of this non-action. This example and others show how institutional power works, and is maintained through academic hierarchy, culture, systems, and norms that protect some at the direct expense of others.

Ahmed identifies and names all the labor involved in maintaining a culture that produces some as vulnerable and others as protected at all costs, alongside the resistant labor. The difficult thing is much of the labor that Ahmed discusses is not regarded as labor in higher education settings. This refusal to recognize makes some particularly vulnerable to abuse. Those of us in higher education are facing unprecedented changes in the ways we work and there is potential in the cultural shifts that cannot be ignored. This cannot be separated from how hierarchies are constructed and maintained. Those of us with stakes in the future higher education can labor against change, or we can labor in ways that facilitate a change with consequences.

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Sharpe, Christina *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke UP, 2016.



Review of *Power Despite Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education*

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Berry, Joe, and Helena Worthen. *Power Despite Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education*. Pluto Press, 2021.

In *Power Despite Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education*, Joe Berry and Helena Worthen present a holistic view of the contingent faculty movement. The authors zoom in and out, moving from the particulars of organizing faculty to general reflections and theoretical thinking about society and education. They also move side to side along a continuum, offering insight and advice to audiences who labor with no real strategy for change, as well as addressing faculty well-versed in structured organizing and unionization. This active flow in the writing enables readers to visualize the whole of the contingent faculty movement and allows different types of academic laborers to locate important commonalities between their experiences.

The first major section of the book describes a movement led by the California Faculty Association (CFA), a group of contingent faculty (“Lecturers”) in the California State University (CSU) system who fought hard for change, and in many ways, succeeded. It is here that we are introduced to the authors’ friend John Hess, a key figure in the book. In fact, the book emerged from recorded conversations between Berry and Hess after the two friends retired and Hess was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. Hess passed in 2015. This section ends in cliffhanger-style with the contingent Hess and the “Lecturers” of the CFA just beginning to show organizational strength and strike potential.

Next, during a thorough history of higher education, Berry and Worthen define the “casualization” of faculty positions as “a solution to a

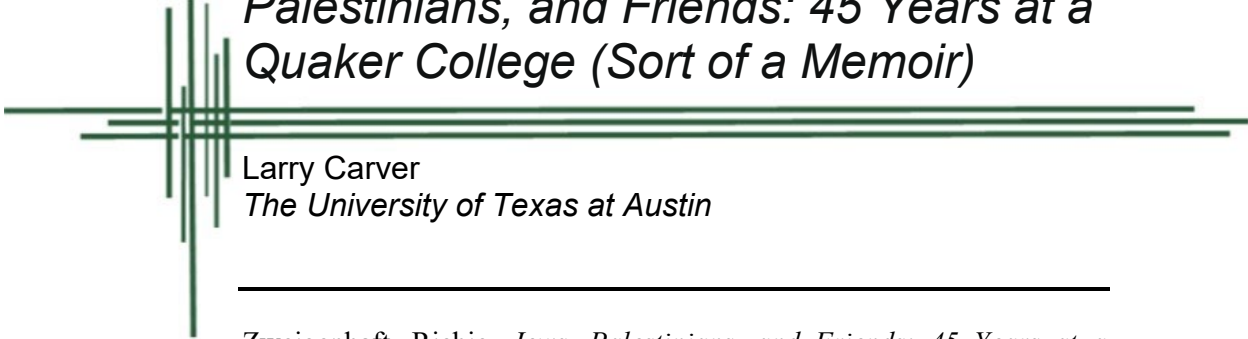
four-part problem confronted by lower-level higher education managers: budget cuts, the uncertainty of enrollments as the student demographic changed, the threat of unionization, and the entry into the faculty labor pool of more and more women and people of color” (5). In this passage, we have an example of ethos, one of the book’s major strengths. Not only is the writing itself direct and uncompromising, but Berry’s history as a national contingent faculty leader with the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor and New Faculty Majority, as well as his authorship of perhaps the most-read book on the subject, *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education*, give us reason to deeply consider the definitions, strategies, and proposals we find in these pages. Co-author Helena Worthen is also an award-winning author and activist, lending further credibility to the book.

The authors then present their Blue Sky vision “for what a union can mean for faculty” (3). The goals of this vision are “freedom of association and speech, a living wage, appropriate benefits, and the opportunity to choose to do this work on a full- or part-time basis for all who are qualified and ready to do it as long as the need for the work (not necessarily the economic demand) exists” (89). While no institution has ever fully implemented this vision, it allows activists to gauge positions along the path to equity. To that end, Berry and Worthen next illustrate how “the Blue Sky Vision fairs in a capitalist society where it goes through the fundamentally adversarial negotiations with a third-party – the employer” (114). This is the point in the book when we return to the CSU system saga, which, despite legislative victories and hard-fought triumphs on the ground, was not able to fully implement a Blue Sky vision, but did secure “the best contract and the best working conditions for contingent faculty in the United States” (3). The authors close the book with several compelling chapters of strategic questions, connections to other historical social justice movements, and reflections of the type that only lifelong academic labor activists can provide.

While such insight makes up the bulk of the important information and advice that readers can take away and use at their own institutions, this book succeeds because of its characters. In addition to the book’s inspiration, John Hess, there are other individuals who give this book life, such as the visionary Susan Meisenhelder, the faculty leader who had a progressive vision of the CFA that included tenure-line and contingent faculty, as well as the humorous Elizabeth Hoffman, CSU Lecturer who was able to secure parking passes for contingent faculty. When told by administration that passes for Lecturers were not possible because there was no official list of Lecturers, Hoffman responded, “You have to give them paychecks, don’t you?” (104).

Including interview material from these key figures speaks to the fact that academic labor advocacy is human-centered work. Whether we are adjunct or tenure-track, it is in seeing our commonalities through laboring at the community college or the university that we may continue

building solidarity as academic workers. *Power Over Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education*, would therefore make for highly useful discussion-fodder for, say, a reading group of varied types of faculty, as well as non-academic laborers for whom contingency is a vital issue.



Review of Richie Zweigenhaft's *Jews, Palestinians, and Friends: 45 Years at a Quaker College (Sort of a Memoir)*

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Zweigenhaft, Richie. *Jews, Palestinians, and Friends: 45 Years at a Quaker College (Sort of a Memoir)*. Half Court Press, 2020.

In exploring “the dramatic transition” Guilford College “made from an all-white conservative school to one that diversified its faculty, its student body, and its board of trustees, and became known as a liberal and progressive college,” Professor Zweigenhaft contributes to our understanding of how “the conflicts between Israel and Palestine” affected Guilford and higher education, 1974 to the present, while shedding light on the challenges confronting liberal arts colleges.¹ “What gives [memoirs] their power,” William Zinsser reminds us, “is the narrowness of their focus. Unlike autobiography, which spans an entire life, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. The memoir writer takes us back to some corner of his...past that was unusually intense....”² That corner for Zweigenhaft is being Jewish.

Zweigenhaft graduated from Wesleyan University in 1967, taking a Ph.D. in Psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, while never in those years setting foot in a synagogue. He had no intention of applying for teaching jobs at religious schools. But given his experience working with Quakers during the anti-war movement in the late 1960s, Guilford seemed attractive. He was warned, however, about Guilford and Greensboro, one friend telling him: “you’re going to have a cross burned on your front lawn!” (4). Warnings aside, he, “Lisa (soon to be my wife), [and] Throckmorton (legendary first dog)” packed their bags for Greensboro, where being “one of the first two full-time tenure-track Guilford College faculty members to call ourselves Jewish” (9) would give him a unique perspective on the dramatic changes this insular institution was to experience.

Guilford soon added three more Jewish faculty members, “five real Jews in two years! What brought this about?” (10). What changed was that Guilford had begun to recruit nationally. The doors had opened, and “although Jews did not exactly flood in, or take over the place, they kept coming” (17). In 1981 the college hired “the first Jew in a senior administrative position” (19). By 2020 the college had hired enough Jews “for a minyan. For you gentiles out there, a minyan is the quorum of ten Jewish people over the age of 13 who are required for traditional public worship” (20).

The college also began to recruit internationally, the first of two Palestinians being hired in 1993. Such hiring led to an “increasingly diversified faculty at Guilford which included those who were outspoken in their criticism of Israel” (37). A divide between the Greensboro Jewish community and the college began to grow. By “2015 there were sharp divisions within the small Jewish student community on campus” (27). Events off and on the campus raised the temperature, one being the presidency of Jimmy Carter, many Jews coming “to see Carter as insufficiently supportive of Israel, and too accommodating to the Palestinians” (31). In the fall of 1982 Guilford held a panel discussion on Israel and Palestine, one that included no Palestinians. The panel’s views increased tensions between Guilford and the Jewish community, as “...the two Jews on the panel...were quite critical of Israel...” and “many in the audience from the Jewish community felt the panel had been one-sided and anti-Israel” (38). Another discussion in 1989, though it included for “the first time a Greensboro rabbi...on a panel with a Palestinian...only added to the negative image many in the local Jewish community had of Guilford.” (40). In 2005 the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions (BDS) movement roiled Guilford and campuses nation-wide.

Events on and off the campus, not unsurprisingly, affected Zweigenhaft. He had grown “up in a family that was devoted to Israel” (55). His “parents never called themselves Zionists, but they assumed that Israel could do no wrong” (53). Though he is “not sure when I became more critical of Israel, and more aware of the lives of Palestinians...,” Zweigenhaft engaged in an “honest struggle with...Zionism and the ‘anguish and pessimism’ that now accompanies it” (57). He reached out to Jonathan Malino, a former colleague, a rabbi and son of a rabbi, who helped “me to figure out how my childhood belief in the early dreams of Israel (as exemplified by the kibbutzim, Israel’s socialist agrarian collectives) were in synch, or how out of synch, with the changing political realities...” (55).

The soul searching, the campus conflicts past and ongoing, though painful and divisive, have, Zweigenhaft believes, led to a better Guilford. Courses on “Judaism: Food, Film and Festival,” “Women and Gender in Islam,” and “War and Peace in the Middle East,” taught by Jewish and Palestinian faculty, now pepper the curriculum (79-80). During Zweigenhaft’s forty-five-year career, Jews and Palestinians became part

of the Guilford community as both faculty and students, making it “a much more vibrant place, a much better liberal arts school than it would have been without them” (80).

That’s one ending. A year later, Zweigenhaft added another. With declining enrollments, Guilford was in financial trouble when COVID-19 hit, but faculty and staff were shocked to learn how much debt had been taken on, with the Board of Trustees having used the school’s treasured “335 acres of woods as collateral for its loans” (82). The president resigned. A blinkered board, unworthy of a college built on Quaker values, hired a hatchet-wielding interim president who proposed that Guilford “eliminate 19 majors” and fire “another 27 faculty members, nearly a third of the faculty” (94). Thanks in part to Zweigenhaft’s efforts, however, Guilford’s AAUP chapter used social media to rally the community. Its Facebook group, “Save Guilford College,” raised money and hired lawyers to represent the faculty. It worked. The Board set aside the proposed terminations. The hatchet-wielder departed. Jim Hood, “a Guilford alumnus, a long-time member of the English department,” agreed to serve as interim president, implementing cost savings the faculty and staff had recommended while providing “the long-missing institutional acknowledgement that things had been mishandled” (107 and 109).

Though proud of the efforts that enabled Guilford to survive in the short-term, Zweigenhaft concludes: “Over the next decade, many schools will close, and Guilford may be one of them” (110). In an e-mail (April 1, 2022), he strikes, however, a cautiously optimistic note: “Guilford’s new President...has gotten good reviews...People on campus are encouraged, though still wary, and both enrollment and fund-raising will be especially important over the next few years.”

Notes

¹ Richie Zweigenhaft, *Jews, Palestinians, and Friends: 45 Years at a Quaker College (Sort of a Memoir)*, 2nd edition, (Half Court Press: Greensboro, North Carolina, 2021), 9. All quotations from Professor Zweigenhaft’s book are from this edition and will be cited by page number in the text.

² William Zinsser, *On Writing Well The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* 30th Anniversary Edition, (HarperCollins: New York, 2006), 135.