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THE NEW ACADEMIC LABOR MARKET AND GRADUATE STUDENTS: INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the system of higher education in the US has embraced a “market ethos” that is altering relationships between administration and faculty, impacting teaching and learning, and recalibrating the purpose of education (Porfilio & Yu 2006; Giroux, 2007; Touchman, 2011; Washburn, 2006). For instance, more and more corporate CEOs have been appointed as top academic administrators; academic institutions have been hiring more administrators and establishing more administrative units for the purpose of centralizing decision-making in administrative offices; universities have increased support for activities and programs that generate student tuition dollars, alumni donations, and corporate endowments, instead of supporting initiatives that support faculty development or student support services; and academics’ intellectual and pedagogical accomplishments are valued for their ability to garner grant dollars, rather than whether they hold the potential to build a just and fair social world (Porfilio & Yu 2006; Giroux, 2007; Glen, 2010; Hechinger & Lauerman, 2010; Touchman, 2011; Washburn, 2006). Therefore, it would not be a stretch to state that the system of higher education in the US is now an “explicitly capitalist” institution whose chief focus is on how to tap revenue streams both inside and outside of the academy (Touchman, 2011, p. 4). The academic managerial class (provosts, vice and associate vice provosts, deans, presidents, vice presidents, etc.)” who “routinely earn six-figure salaries, often with generous perks including vacation homes,” along with the numerous corporate leaders who have been called upon to sell products and services to make the university “attractive” to potential students and donors, are the chief beneficiaries in the “new normal” of higher education in the US (Haman, 2013). As the contributors of this special issue of *Workplace* demonstrate below, graduate students and numerous contingent faculty members in the US are the social actors who have been most harmed, both professionally and economically, as academic institutions become purely capitalistic breeding grounds.

As higher education institutions in the US shift to resemble a structure based on corporate boardrooms and shopping centers, they have engendered a “student as a consumer” culture. Rather than guiding students to become critical citizens who are capable of understanding what causes institutional oppression and how to dismantle it, many instructors feel compelled to meet students’ market-driven demands and prepare them for success in the ‘real world.’ They are cognizant that they may face reprisals—even termination—if they fail to make students ‘happy.’ They also recognize that their academic units or institutions may be placed in dire situations if students are not ‘completely satisfied.’ Many of today’s college students have been positioned to view education as a service that must fulfill their personal needs, rather than their intellectual development. Additional pernicious trends linked to corporate dominance over life in higher education institutions are witnessed in the following developments: the for-profit sector is educating numerous students who are academically underprepared; top executives at publicly traded for-profit colleges are

reaping billions of dollars in profit from mainly US taxpayers; contingent faculty comprise nearly 70 percent of the entire academic labor force; the U.S. government is making “more money off student loans this fiscal year (2013) than ExxonMobil, Apple, J.P. Morgan Chase or Fannie Mae made on their respective businesses last year (2012)” (Jessie, 2013); and entire academic programs are being eliminated because they are not deemed profitable or not considered important because they fail prepare students for ‘success’ in the ‘real’ world.

The changing context of higher education has been particularly deleterious for advanced graduate students who seek to develop careers in academic circles. The prospect for advanced doctoral students, let alone freshly minted PhDs or scholars who have held terminal degrees for many years, to land tenure-track positions in institutions of higher education is at best dim (Faunace, 2010). For those who serve as contingent faculty members, life is generally difficult within and outside of educational institutions. The vast majority of contingent faculty members are not paid a living wage. Many lack health care insurance and some survive on public assistance (Barkawi, 2013; Patten, 2012). This is in spite of fact that they, collectively, teach more courses (and students) than their tenured or tenure-track counterparts. They also often lack institutional support from university administrators and their tenured or tenured-track colleagues, and are thus deprived of relationships that may position them to develop the cultural capital needed to land one of the few tenure-track positions available (Berrett, 2012).

Unlike some who point to faculty, students, administration or governance as the sources of the changing conditions within higher education, the contributors and editors of this special issue recognize how the dominant ideological doctrine at today’s historical moment – neoliberalism – is largely responsible for the corporate nature of education, the rise and dominance of contingent faculty, and the withdrawal of the state resources from institutions of higher education (Hush, 2011; Porfilio & Yu, 2006). According to Hursh (2011), neoliberal ideology is grounded in the belief that economic prosperity and improvements of segments of the social world, such as health care, education and the environment, emanate from “unregulated free markets” and the withering away of the state from regulating businesses. Neoliberalism is also responsible for harming humanity because it is grounded in the beliefs that important social services ought to be eliminated or privatized and that people should become self-regulated entrepreneurs (Hursh, 2011).

For instance, several contributors to this issue elucidate how this doctrine is responsible for their experiences as contingent faculty members and debt-ridden, freshly minted PhDs. Other authors provide critical historical insight as to how neoliberalism has come to impact intellectual contributions in the academy, whereas some scholars provide theoretical insight to lay bare the discursive systems that keep graduate students, academics, and citizens from confronting institutional structures, practices, and systems of knowledge, leading to the marginalization of academics and hobbling higher education from being equitable for all. Additionally, the collective scholarship provides necessary guideposts and recommendations so that higher education becomes a “humanizing force in society, where the value of people is always a priority” (Giroux, 2001, p. 47), instead of a corporate force where greed, competition, vulnerability and suffering is the stark reality.

The issue begins with a commentary by co-editor Julie Gorlewski, who describes her experiences as an assistant professor at a public university and considers the messages sent to and received by junior faculty. Linking the neoliberal economy with personal encounters, Gorlewsk’s piece is echoed by the final essay in the issue which also connects the micro and macro contexts of teaching and learning today.

In the first essay of this issue, “Academia and the American Worker: Right to Work in an Era of Disaster Capitalism?,” Paul Thomas takes inventory of the changing economic climate experienced by K-12 schoolteachers and other workers in order to detail the phenomenon of the “reduced labor market experienced by graduate students seeking tenure-track positions as professor.” According to the author, today’s economic context is predicated on economic and political leaders in the US supporting policies that treat working-class people are purely disposable objects who function as merely as “part-time interchangeable widgets (whether wait staff, temp staff, or adjunct instructors)—with education serving as a sorting process.” By providing several snapshots of his teaching with future teachers, Thomas illustrates

why many teachers fail to understand the systemic forces behind the corporate and political desire to control their labor as well as the labor of million of other working-class citizens, including the labor of graduate students and academics. Next, the author documents how the science fiction (SF) work, *Cloud Atlas*, lends understanding to “the paradoxical relationship between education and the American workforce.” He also suggests the text will also help critical pedagogues highlight the dichotomy between informed workers who are agents capable of understanding what is responsible for the marginalization workers who are simply “a wage-slave cog in assembly-line capitalism (Bessie, 2013).” After unpacking why public school teachers in the US have been successfully targeted become workers who are vilified by some citizens in the US, Thomas concludes the essay by examining “three final texts—a work of educational journalism, a documentary, and a TV sit-com—in order to add a final piece to the puzzle in which education is touted as essential for a vibrant American workforce while American workers are being reduced to wage-slaves in an expanding service industry.”

In the second essay of this issue, “Survival Guide Advice and the Spirit of Academic Entrepreneurship: Why Graduate Students Will Never Just Take Your Word for It,” Paul Cook illustrates how the changing nature of capitalism is responsible for generating a pernicious academic culture where graduate students who aspire to land one of the few tenure-track, permanent jobs are situating themselves as “self-making and self-laboring” entrepreneurs. The author links the entrepreneurial mindset embraced by the vast majority of graduate students to the proliferation of mainstream knowledge continually offered to them in “blogs, books, and brown bag workshops.” Cook argues the collective impact of this advice knowledge causes graduate students to “think of themselves as individuals constantly in need of introspective work on themselves in order remain, if not employed, then at least employable,” instead of reflecting upon how to work with their colleagues in order to “reclaim their futures as aspiring members of the professoriate through activism, collaboration, and collective action.” Cook concludes his essay by offering a call for action that may challenge the exploitive relations of neoliberal capitalism as well as the self-help culture propelling graduate students to be fixated on being “immanently employable, indifferent to the contingencies of the academic labor market, and forever safe from the lottery-like nature of academic employment.” He states:

We nonetheless need to do more. We need to make a concerted effort—together—to object to a system that exploits us, wastes resources, and ruins lives. We need to reject the implicit value system that says that people are expendable and that working for ten or fifteen years just to get a shot at a secure, moderately compensated position in a university is not acceptable. We need to affirm that as workers, as laborers, and as professionals, even though many of us do indeed “love what we do, sometimes to the point of denying that our wages matter at all,” we are not “special, but . . . typical” (Bousquet, “We Work”).

In the third essay of this issue, “Standing Against Future Contingency: Activist Mentoring in Composition Studies,” Casie Hurt Fedukovich asks a critical question: “why do doctoral students in English continue their studies when there is merely a slim prospect of securing a tenure line, but a more likely the prospect of forfeiting “four to five years of wage earning?” Based upon qualitative data “from interviews with six doctoral students in English who have chosen to stay in their courses of study,” the author suggests the doctoral students’ “legacies of blue-collar work” grounded their “decisions to continue.” Furthermore, Fedukovich suggests her participants’ narratives also indicate critical scholars must take inventory of a “number of historically situated factors, such as labor ideologies and political, personal, and professional commitments,” so as to understand doctoral students’ persistence to complete their degrees. The author concludes the essay “with a recommendation to incorporate activist mentoring as a way to quietly and incrementally stand against contingency.” An essential part of Fedukovich’s recommendation consists of activist mentors taking four “specific “subtle actions”:

Providing culturally influenced mentoring, offering opportunities to unsettle students’ assumptions through radical reflexivity, arranging for informal mentoring with non-tenure-track faculty, and building in formal course work that explores inequalities in higher education.

In the fourth essay, “From the New Deal to the Raw Deal: 21st Century Poetics and Academic Labor,” Virginia Konchan argues that the way to break free of neoliberal ideology, both inside and outside of academic circles, is to see “its infiltration into one’s decision making and structures of valuation (personal, ethical, and aesthetic).” The author devotes much of her essay to providing support for this critical insight. For instance, she details how poets in higher education are failing to document what social and economic forces impact our world because they must serve as “bonded laborers within a zombie economy that successfully “markets” its capitalist movements of extortion and zero remuneration (the purchase of degrees, books, conference travel, contest fees, and a loss of earning power for those in school or working as adjuncts or lecturers) as “investments.” Konchan also provides historical perspective in relation to the causes spurring hostile working conditions for contemporary academics and for those who aspire to be professors. In doing so, she connects the move by large-scale corporations and international organizations to globalize capital throughout the so-called Third World during the 1980s to the university embracing numerous corporatist formations during same period, including the “the hiring of private employee service contractors to oversee financial operations” and the funding of numerous “corporate-funded research labs.” The author concludes by suggesting what ought to be done to ensure workers are able to “control over one’s intellectual capital as well as the production of knowledge.”

In the next essay of this issue, “How to Survive a Graduate Career,” Roger Whitson presents a critical narrative that documents his own “own health conditions for the sake of solidarity with my adjunct, graduate student and NTT colleagues and to show that all of us are vulnerable to episodes that — without health insurance — could ruin or kill us.” Specifically, the author illustrates how bouts with vertigo and hearing loss made him vulnerable with respect to the completion of his doctoral degree as well as for landing an academic position in academia. He explains how, through a reaffirming network of friends, families, and colleagues, he was able to both achieve these aims and to manage his pain. Whitson also suggests that developing supportive communities also has the potential of bringing awareness to and overcoming the impact of the economic labor market. He states:

Academics and graduate students need a better sense of community. We need to see how dependent we all are on each other’s work, ideas, and activism. We need to understand that— in an era of budget cuts, continuing casualization of our workplace, and the integration of online teaching— we are all in this together.

The author concludes his essay by pinpointing several ways in which graduate students and contingent faculty members can build networks of solidarity and support through their vulnerable professional subject positions. He argues: vulnerability can push contingent faculty and graduate students “to rethink scholarly community and encourage their more vulnerable colleagues. It makes them interested, for example, in “building” more than “critiquing.” It also “can help them “depathologize” feelings of inadequacy felt by many contingent teachers in higher education, while engaging in a more powerful critique of a neoliberal University system that exploits contingent labor to make up for losses in state funding.”

In the sixth essay, “In Every Way I’m Hustlin’: The Post-Graduate School Intersectional Experiences of Activist-Oriented Adjunct and Independent Scholars,” Naomi Reed and Amy Brown express the belief that many academic advisors and hiring committees take a shortsighted view regarding productive professional activities for junior scholars and pedagogues. Although publishing, obtaining grants, and serving on committees are valuable for fostering junior scholars’ professional development, the authors demonstrate there is at least equal value when contingent faculty members and graduate students teach “students who deal daily with issues of poverty, immigration, racism, or gun violence.” Not coincidentally, the authors have educated students who are marginalized by their race, class, and gender. Here, they reflect upon how their teaching experiences position them to see “through multiple lenses, strengthen our pedagogical skills, and further refine and actualize (their) political agendas.” By serving as adjunct instructor in many educative communities and working with various student populations, including business officials, low-income students, and undergraduate students, Amy Brown moved towards praxis in her scholarship. She also learned, through her mentor’s advice about being marketable for tenure-track positions, about “the myriad ways in which academia, and the academic job market, helps to reproduce an

economy of urban space in which the jobs with the most clout and capital are those that serve to insulate and protect current inequities.” Similarly, Naomi Reed’s pedagogical work with community college students made her recognize how to make “education emancipatory and accessible to all students.” She not only “raised one student’s consciousness, but had also used the community college space to make very real social and political change.” The authors conclude the essay by illustrating further much of the value of part-time academic labor—it is “as a site of activist engagement and marginalized subjectivity, and therefore as cultural capital.”

In the seventh essay of the special issue, “Ivory Tower Graduates in the Red: The Role of Debt in Higher Education,” Nicholas D. Hartlep and Lucille L. T. Eckrich share a counter-narrative of Nicholas’ financial hardships endured during his time in graduate school and as a full-time academic. His narrative is representative of numerous other graduate students who experience financial hardship “while earning and paying for advanced degrees.” The chapter also includes a critical analysis Nicholas’ narrative, which was conducted Eckrich, in order to illuminate the financial implications of Nicholas’ pursuing and obtaining a doctoral degree. The authors conclude the essay “with recommendations for all Ph.Ds.—whether newly minted, up-and-coming, or long established—especially those in the field of education. One of the authors’ key recommendations for the academic community is to

...educate ourselves and our students, colleagues, friends (virtual and F2F), neighbors, and relatives about the history and nature of money and how to supersede our way into a postmodern epoch worth living in and bequeathing. For workers who profess education as Jackson (2012) does, our very livelihood depends on our critical economic literacy because, as the stories of Rose and Nicholas suggest and the Chomsky epigraph signals, monetary reform is necessary in order for all to be able to engage in education and for every society to achieve the conditions of the possibility of public education.

In the final essay of the special issue, “Lines of Flight: The New Ph.D. as Migrant,” Alvin Cheng-Him Lin details “the employment crisis and trace its roots in the transformed positioning of the university in the neoliberal political economy.” He also explores “the challenges facing those doctorate holders who have opted to migrate for employment in foreign universities.” For instance, the author notes: “Academic speech can become a contested issue in foreign employment.” Some “academic migrants may also have to contend with the uncertainties of the integrity of their university administrations.” The author concludes the essay by reflecting on “the opportunities for radical pedagogy that academic migrants can seize upon for social transformation.”

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