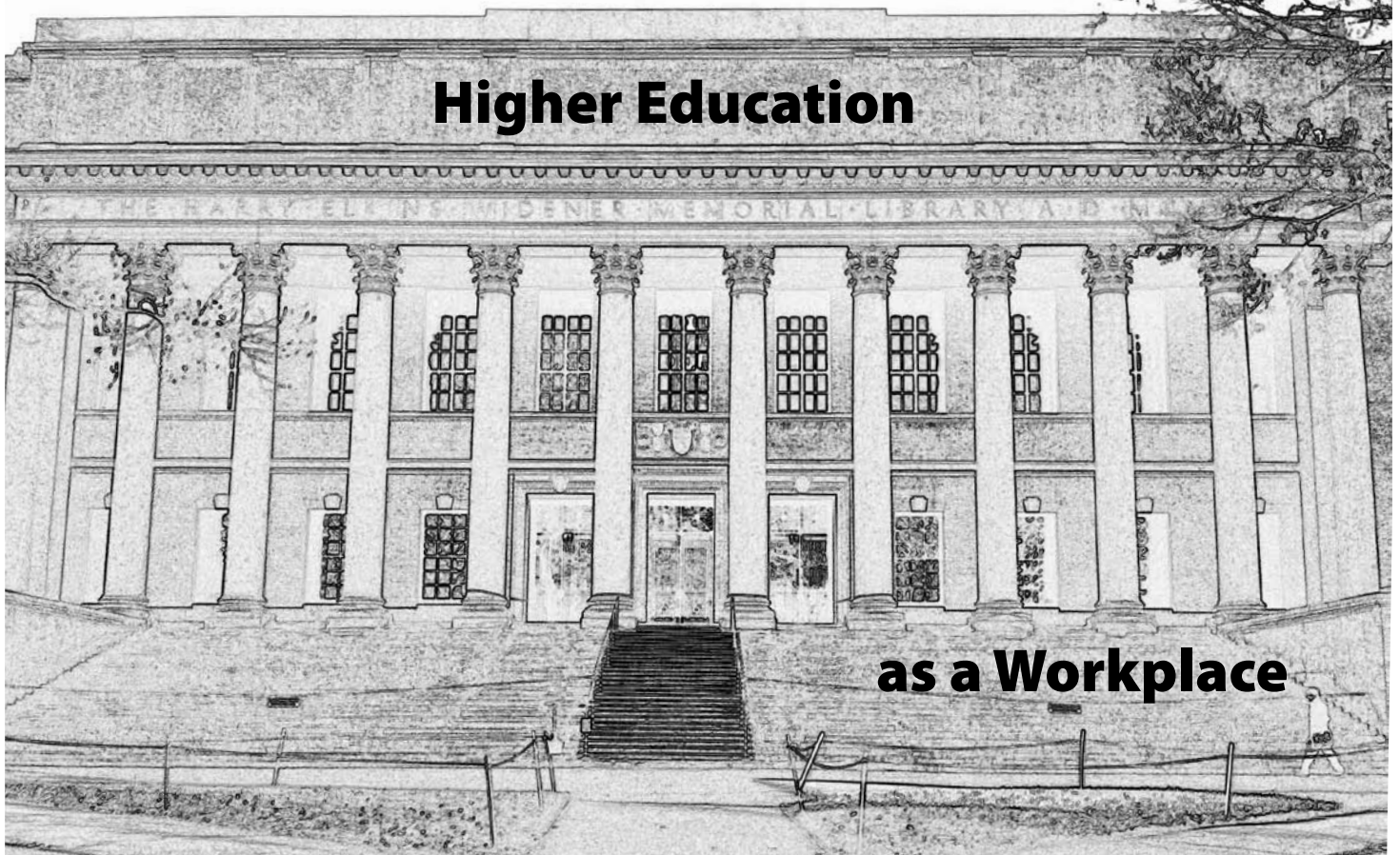


# Higher Education



## as a Workplace

BY JOE BERRY AND HELENA WORTHEN

When we talk about higher education from the point of view of access, the issues are: How much does it cost? How hard is it to get in and stay in? Who can afford it? Who is being recruited? Education is an engine of social mobility, but only to the extent that access is equitable; when it is not equitable, it is a powerful sorting mechanism.

When we talk about higher education as a creator of social value, we want to know if enough people are studying basic sciences, history, primary-care medicine, social welfare, languages, and other fields that won't pay off right away. Do faculty members have real academic freedom? Are research agendas captive to short-term goals of corporate funding? Nothing else in society substitutes for higher education as a place where long-term thinking and learning take place; but are those still the top priorities? Education as training for critical citizenship and democratic participation is now under attack.

However, higher education is also a workplace, and not just for faculty. Looking at it from the perspective of the people who work in it explains a lot about what has happened to it in terms of access and as a creator of social value.

### Neoliberal Transformation

The neoliberal policy agenda, which has been dominant in the United States and around the world since the 1970s, consists of deregulation, the elimination of labor unions, free trade, the commodification of nearly everything, privatization, and financialization. Regulations passed to control industries and protect consumers and citizens are wiped away; the organizations that collectively protect workers are destroyed; the public sector gets sold to private interests, and social value gets transformed into money or "financial instruments."

When neoliberalism comes to higher education, we see reduced access sold at higher market prices, degree inflation driven by the increasing demand by employers for higher credentials for the same job, and the revision of educational/training programs to grant higher and higher degrees for the same jobs. Physical therapy, for instance, has gone from an AA or BS job to a PhD job in less than 40 years. There is also now longer time to graduation because of a lack of required classes being offered. Programs have been "hollowed out" by the elimination of courses and requirements that promote critical thought, such as history, leaving those that only focus on the technical aspects of learning a profession or job. Entire departments and programs, especially in the social sciences, humanities and arts, are being eliminated. Class time has been cut to allow for faster "degree completion." Some programs now require that some courses be taken online. >>

We see reduced support services and unmanageable student-debt loads. There are also fewer graduates in basic sciences, primary-care medicine, social welfare, foreign languages, and many other functions that are essential to a good society. We see the shrinkage of institutional support by state and local governments, and conversion to a system more dependent on “soft money” grants, which are temporary and limited to specific projects. Students are now being asked to shoulder a greater proportion of the costs of their educations individually, with skyrocketing tuition and fees. The student aid system has converted from a mostly need-based grant system to a private loan system. More “merit” (non-need based) scholarships are aimed to attract the top scoring students to a particular institution and hence raise its place in the annual rankings. Trustees and top administrators, increasingly, come from the corporate world, with training primarily in business administration rather than education or academics. They speak openly of universities as “profit-making centers.”

The same neoliberal strategies that are making education worse from the point of view of students and society in general are making jobs in education worse. The dominant employment model is casualization, in which a steady job becomes a part-time, temporary, insecure job with lower wages and benefits. This is accompanied by privatization of previously public and often unionized work; outsourcing of support functions, often to private companies that lack accountability to the mission of the institution; loosening of accreditation standards (for example, to approve 100% online programs or reduce overall

requirements); and even surrendering control of basic teaching, research, and hiring to “the market” (including corporate donors). This applies equally to non-academic and faculty employees.

### **Casualization and Loss of Control over Work**

Neoliberal strategies have redrawn the face of higher education in the span of one working generation, since the 1970s. Therefore they have also redrawn the terrain upon which workers in higher education and their organizations struggle to survive and improve their position.

Contingent or casual workers do not have job security. They may work one week but not the next, one semester but not the next. Whether they work or do not work depends not only upon what needs to be done but also on the preferences of the employer. In the United States, most people who lack a union are “at will” employees. That is, they work as long as the employer wants them around. Under these conditions, it takes courage, and is often unwise, to disagree with an employer whose mantra is “do more with less.”

Until the 1970s, colleges and universities were largely governed by a hierarchy of departmental and discipline-based academic committees, some with elected chairs. These committees worked closely with administrators on academic matters, but were not routinely subservient to them. In order for this system to work, people had to have job security. That is what “academic freedom” really means. Today, with over 70% of instructors teaching without the job security of tenure, faculty have lost this power. The most important single force to restrain higher education management from surrendering to corporate initiatives, as a result, has been greatly weakened.

## **City College of San Francisco vs. Accreditation**

A snapshot of the struggle at the present moment is taking place in San Francisco. As of November 2012, the largely de-fanged accreditation system (Western States Schools and Colleges, and its community college sub-section) was attacking one of the largest and most progressive community colleges in the country. While allowing multiple abuses of historic academic standards at many institutions, the accreditation agency was targeting the City College of San Francisco, not on the basis of any educational deficiencies, of which it found none, but on the basis that it had been fiscally irresponsible by having too few paid administrators, granting excessive pay and benefits to its majority part-time faculty, being governed too democratically, and refusing to narrow its historic mission of service to working-class San Francisco. City College of SF is known throughout the nation as a desirable place to work, largely because of the working (and learning) conditions achieved by decades of union organizing and negotiation.

Just as contingent status has undercut the ability of academic employees to defend the universities' educational mission, so has it undercut the ability of non-faculty workers to protect the standards of their work and the services they provide. Food workers now often work for corporate contractors—like the food-and-facilities giants Sodexo and Marriott—and have much less say over the meals that they provide. This work becomes less of a craft and more of an assembly line. Custodial work, often contracted out, is subjected to “stretch-out”—cuts to the workforce, and proportionately more work for those remaining. In some institutions of higher education, custodians may sweep public hallways or empty hallway wastebaskets only once a week, for lack of adequate staff. Library workers, due to understaffing and the burdens of supervising increasing numbers of less-qualified but lower-paid assistants, no longer have time to assist faculty or students on library research. Reduced groundskeeping staffs, once charged with maintaining precious and carefully designed landscapes, are assigned to mainly mow lawns and empty outdoor trash cans.

University workers have not accepted these changes without a fight. At Chicago's Roosevelt University, a fight over academic freedom erupted in 2008, when an adjunct instructor was forbidden from mentioning Zionism in a comparative-religions class. At the University of Illinois, food service workers objected to having to use pre-packaged prepared foods, which had exposed them to replacement by cheaper and less-trained student workers. Librarians at the University of Illinois and at the University of California-Berkeley have filed numerous grievances over changes in their working conditions that degraded their professional roles while cutting their numbers. Union groundskeepers at Berkeley have also filed grievances over having their work reduced to little more than emptying garbage cans. In summer 2012, union maintenance workers at Ohio's Kenyon College were fighting the outsourcing of their jobs to Sodexo. These workers, however, all had unions. When there are no unions, there is unlikely to be a fightback.

### **The Class Structure in Higher Education**

In the last 30 years, the higher-education workforce has been completely reconstituted. As a result, class lines in the higher education workplace have been redrawn, and with a heavy marker.

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Under corporate-heavy boards of trustees, the top tier has grown, concentrating power in the hands of presidents and provosts who model themselves on corporate CEOs. They are, in turn, surrounded by staffs of highly paid professionals, development specialists, planners, liaisons, and other lower administrators. The shrinking second tier includes full-time tenure-track faculty and skilled career service workers, blue- and white-collar, who used to account for the majority of the workforce. They are now finding themselves pressed into the expanding third tier, made up of contingent faculty, outsourced and casualized service workers, and on-call temporary “extra help.” The range of compensation and job security from the top to the bottom of this mirrors the broader society. Those in the top tier, recruited from a national labor

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market, are highly compensated. The bottom tier, recruited locally, scrapes by on whatever passes for the regional living wage, if not less.

### **The Rise of the For-Profits**

Just as jobs and institutions have changed internally under the pressures of neoliberalism, so is the industry as a whole being transformed by for-profit, often corporate-owned, post-secondary institutions. The largest university in the United States is now the for-profit University of Phoenix, with over 100,000 students being taught in centers all over the United States, as well as online. In the for-profits, all non-management workers are at-will employees and most are part-timers. Traditional faculty work is unbundled into separate jobs, with “content deliverers” having very little say over curriculum, despite managements' protestations to educational accreditation agencies.

The rise of the for-profits is important, in part, because of their size and because they attract the very students, often working class and minority, now being turned away (by program cuts and

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rising costs) from traditional community colleges and state universities. It is also important, however, because they run on public money, with the vast majority of their students getting federal student aid or military benefits. Their model—the fully neoliberal, privatized, corporatized, casualized, yet publicly funded institution—is exerting tremendous influence on traditional higher education. Some traditional institutions, taking the hint, have started explicitly for-profit subdivisions.

### Pushing Back

The generation that greatly expanded higher-education unions in the 1960s and 1970s—especially in the public sector and not only among faculty—is still represented, though fast retiring, on campuses nationwide. The campus labor move-

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ment is one of the brightest spots in the country, both in terms of its spirit of struggle and its efforts to organize new workers. This is important not just for workers in higher education, but also as an example of successful organizing in a growth industry. Higher education is now a major employer in almost all metropolitan areas.

The organizations representing blue-collar non-teaching staff are the oldest part of the campus labor movement, and have often led the struggle for workers' rights on college and university campuses. In some cases, they have provided the spark that ignited struggles by other campus workers, including teachers and graduate students. One of the most famous examples is the Yale food service workers, who formed Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees (now UNITE HERE) Local 35 in the 1930s, and have sparked or assisted in unionization struggles of clerical, technical, hospital, and grad student employees ever since.

The fruits of these struggles can be seen in the fact that, in 2012, 25% of full-time faculty and 20% of part-time faculty are unionized. While this is lower than the unionization rates among school teachers, firefighters, and postal workers, it is much higher than that of the U.S. workforce as a whole. Part-time faculty are the most highly unionized part-time contingent workforce in the United States. Unfortunately, unionization data are not available for other parts of the higher-education workforce.

The highest-profile campus labor struggles of recent years, meanwhile, have been those of graduate employees at major universities—graduate students who work as teaching or research assistants while they are in school. Unionization drives have been successful in many major public institutions, and graduate employees continue to fight for labor-law reforms to force private-sector employers to recognize grad-employee unions. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) is now reconsidering, for the second time, whether graduate students are employees under the law or merely students, who do not enjoy the protection of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA).

As is often the case, though, the aspect of the struggle that has gotten the most media attention is probably not the most important one in the long run. The struggle affecting the most workers is the rising movement of contingent faculty, most of whom do not work in Ph.D.-granting universities but in community colleges, where they constitute the vast majority of the faculty. Ironically, a graduate student who has a union that has bargained pay increases and benefits is likely to graduate with a PhD only to face a future as an adjunct (contingent) instructor. They will lose health benefits and take a pay cut, compared to what they had in graduate school, even if they are lucky enough to get hired into a unionized faculty.

The health and growth of the contingent-faculty movement has been the result of its “inside-outside” strategy. The inside strategy is to build pressure within traditional academic unions (National Education Association, American Association of University Professors, and American Federation of Teachers) to pay attention to the needs of the now-majority contingents, a strategy that has resulted in slow but meaningful changes in these organizations. The outside strategy has been even more important: Contingent faculty have organized themselves, both through committees

and task forces within traditional teacher unions and through independent organizations like the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL) and the New Faculty Majority. Together, the inside and outside strategies have resulted in measurable gains for many contingent faculty, but the contingent-faculty movement remains far from its ultimate goal of abolishing contingency and the two-tier system among higher-education faculty. Its most striking weakness has been, so far, its near-complete failure to organize the 100%-contingent faculty in the for-profit sector, which has only three recognized bargaining units in the entire United States. No task for the future is more important strategically.

### The Way Forward

Higher education workers are currently engaging in serious and spirited debate about the way forward strategically for the campus labor movement. That debate is taking place in large, animated meetings at *Labor Notes* conferences; at the first ever inter-union campus organizing conference, sponsored by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the University of Massachusetts-Boston Labor Center in 2011; at international COCAL conferences; and in an increasing number of informal networks and websites. Among the ideas being discussed are campus labor coalitions; strategies for outreach to the broader labor movement, students, and parents; efforts to organize on the regional-workforce level rather than employer-by-employer; getting the over twenty national unions that represent campus workers to develop an action network; and building an informational database for non-faculty campus workers. None of these

strategic objectives, however, is within the capabilities of any individual union.

Two strategies in particular are emerging. The first is the “metro strategy” which, instead of organizing each employer’s workforce separately, on the model of most traditional unions, seeks to organize the regional workforce working for multiple employers. This approach has shown promise where it has been attempted, in Boston, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. The second is the formation of campus labor coalitions, bringing together all the unions of different workers who work on the same campus. Such coalitions at two University of Illinois campuses recently helped win major battles for graduate employees and service workers. The metro strategy so far has only involved one kind of worker (contingent faculty) at multiple employers, while campus labor coalitions involve all kinds of workers at one employer. Just as campus labor coalitions are a key to winning local struggles, a national, concerted and more united campus labor movement is required to divert higher education from its present rush towards neoliberalism. That is a fight that reaches well outside the ivory tower. **D&S**

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**DATA SOURCE:** Directory of Faculty Bargaining Agents and Contracts in Higher Education in the United States, 2012, National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, City University of New York.

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