

Academic Labor: Research and Artistry

Volume 3

Article 9

2019

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Recommended Citation

Marburger, Zachary B. (2019) "Away with the Apprentice: Graduate Worker Advocacy Groups and Rhetorical Representation," *Academic Labor: Research and Artistry*. Vol. 3 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/alra/vol3/iss1/9>

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Away with the Apprentice: Graduate Worker Advocacy Groups and Rhetorical Representation

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In February of 2019, the Committee on Rights and Compensation at the University of Colorado-Boulder, made up of graduate student workers employed by the university, led a walkout and protest after circulating a petition that collected over 1,600 signatures. The issue at stake: university fee waivers for graduate workers, which in some cases can be as much as ten percent of a graduate workers' yearly paycheck (Niedringhaus). Almost simultaneously, at my home institution of Colorado State University (CSU) in Fort Collins, Colorado, a petition was launched to raise the minimum instructor salary across the university, noting that the Modern Language Association (MLA) recommends a minimum base salary of \$10,900 per three-credit course—a far more generous wage than most adjunct, part-time, or non-tenure-track faculty receive.

The demands in the separate petitions highlight the still stark power discrepancies amongst workers in higher education, even when both worker groups hold relatively marginalized positions within their institution. Graduate workers were willing to stage an extremely public walkout over fee waivers, a small but important step towards the livable wage asked for by non-tenure-track faculty (NTTF) at CSU. Perhaps the perspective of one student worker, quoted at the Committee on Rights and Compensation (CRC) protest, illustrates the difference between the demands of graduate students and that of part-time and non-tenure-track faculty: “I think the biggest change for me was that I didn’t really conceive of myself as a worker right away,” said Marianne Reddan, a doctoral student in psychology and neuroscience.

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“Then I started to realize: No, I am. I then realized that unions are something really important for graduate students” (Niedringhaus).

Protests like the one that took place at CU Boulder are becoming increasingly common at universities across the United States (for a round-up of recent protests and organization efforts, see Flaherty), as more and more graduate students seek to take advantage of a 2016 ruling by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) at Columbia University, which stated that graduate workers at private universities are employees under the National Labor Relations Act and have the right to organize (Kroeger, et al). The movement has gained even more urgency in recent months after the NLRB announced in the summer of 2019 that it was “revisiting” the 2016 ruling around whether certain “services” graduate workers provide the university should be classified as “work” (Douglas-Gabriel). Though the NLRB ruling addressed private universities only, it provided a kairotic¹² moment for advocacy groups at public universities to make their voices heard—a window that, for graduate workers and other stakeholders interested in affecting change, might be closing quickly, given the historically anti-union status of the current Republican administration that controls the NLRB (Saltzman).

If changes like the ones sought by the CRC are going to happen, the first step for those stakeholders lies not in vast administrative or policy shifts, but in redirecting the attitudes of graduate workers themselves in a way that mirrors that of the protestor from the CRC. The doctoral student referenced above is typical of the current graduate worker in higher education in that they struggle to articulate a clear definition of their identity as both student and laborer. Graduate students who also work within the university—as research and teaching assistants, administrators, tutors, instructors, program directors, etc.—must navigate a dual-identity unique to their position in higher education. As both students seeking expertise and further development opportunities in their chosen field and workers laboring in said field, graduate students work with, and directly for, the administrators and professors who supervise their success professionally and academically (a distinction that becomes significantly muddled when discussing graduate workers).

This article addresses that dual-positionality, and the rhetoric that organizers and activists with the CRC at CU Boulder used to negotiate their marginalized status. I begin by acknowledging the ongoing issues around the employment status of contingent faculty in higher education, highlighting the similarities and contrasting the differences between their status and that of graduate workers. As a student in a program centered within rhetoric and writing, I focus on position statements from groups focused in English and Writing Studies, which are uniquely affected by the use of contingent faculty. Following that, I discuss how the dual-

¹² Kairotic, or kairos, in rhetorical tradition refers to an opportune time, place, or setting.

positionality of the graduate worker manifests itself in a self-identifying and limiting rhetoric of the apprentice, which obscures their identity as a laborer and which no longer meets the needs of graduate workers. Next, using Edward Schiappa's work on how definitions are formed and circulated, I analyze the public literature of the CRC to discover how the group is addressing previously held assumptions of graduate workers by adopting the language, and some of the issues, of a more privileged worker class. By attempting to identify the rhetorical moves that graduate workers at the CRC are using to inch their way up the metaphorical ladder (from apprentice to professional), my hope is that graduate workers, and other contingent groups, can better self-represent their stated goals and the value they provide to agents inside the universities, as well as the greater public.

My intent is not to delve into the efficiencies of a collective bargaining agreement or come to some determination as to the effectiveness of graduate worker unions. It is also not to deeply engage with any of the legal hurdles to unionization efforts in private or public universities (for a detailed summary of pertinent law around unionization efforts amongst graduate students in higher education, see Saltzman). Instead, I am forwarding the case that the CRC, in accordance with their desire to be recognized and collectively bargain with administrators at CU Boulder, engages in rhetorical arguments that a) indicate what they perceive as their value, b) indicate the gap that they believe exists between the value they perceive and how they are currently valued, and c) preemptively counter or directly engage with disagreements about said value gap. By looking more closely at those rhetorical appeals, techniques may emerge that uncover new ways of thinking about how graduate workers should present their identity as both student and professional.

Contingent Faculty and Graduate Workers

It is no secret, nor is it a new revelation, that there is concern amongst faculty and administrators about the growing dependence of contingent faculty in higher education. According to the 2012 survey report *A Portrait of Part-time Faculty Members*, conducted by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce, the contingent academic workforce—made up of adjunct, NTTF, part-time instructors, and graduate workers—now represents close to seventy percent of all faculty in higher education (2). Those numbers, while startling, perhaps undersell the effect of contingent faculty on teachers and workers in the field of composition and writing. Again, according to the Coalition on the Academic Workforce, 16.4 percent of all part-time faculty are employed teaching courses in English language and literature—including first-year composition course sections that make up the bulk of the English Department's offerings to non-liberal arts students (8). The makeup of most universities is such that educators and students in the liberal arts, and composition programs in particular, are most clearly affected by a part-time designation.

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As I alluded to in the introduction, by highlighting the difference in concerns amongst graduate workers and NTTF at CU Boulder and CSU respectively, there are important distinctions between member groups that fall under the umbrella of what we label contingent faculty. In looking briefly at the position statements on the use of NTTF from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), and the use of part-time or adjunct faculty by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)—both of which outline the problem as decades old and present a list of suggestions for how to support NTTF professionally and financially—the need for making those distinctions should become apparent. Because while both groups share a marginalized status and similar concerns, the rhetoric they express to achieve their shared goals, and the rhetoric used towards them in opposition, are markedly different.

As their part-time status indicates, NTTF and graduate workers share similar concerns relating to their vulnerable employment status in higher education. The action recommendations from the CCCC's 2016 statement "Working Conditions for Non-Tenure-Track Faculty" illustrate this overlap. The authors' recommendations on what to do about the continued overreliance on NTTF can be broken down into broad categories such as workload, resources, hiring, evaluation, and compensation—issues that also concern graduate workers, particularly instructors. However, despite acknowledging how dependent writing programs are on contingent faculty, absent from their recommendations are concerns relating specifically to the dual-positionality of graduate workers. Indeed, the only mention of graduate work is a suggestion that NTTF be eligible for low- or no-cost graduate courses if they contribute to "professional development or lead toward improved credentials for the teaching of writing" ("CCCC Statement on Working Conditions").

The 1997 "Statement from the Conference on the Growing Use of Part-Time and Adjunct Faculty" by the NCTE does express concern about how graduate programs are filled, and whether universities are doing enough to prepare graduate students for careers outside the academy. In their suggested action items, the authors of the position statement ask, "Whether there is an overproduction of Ph.D.'s. And if so, what are the responsibilities of academic departments and professional associations to deal with this overproduction in a rational and ethical manner" ("Statement...on the Growing Use")? Leaving aside the question of whether there are too many graduate students being produced, the rhetorical framing used by the NCTE leaves out questions of graduate worker compensation and concerns itself wholly with worker development, and their place within the department. The assumption, perhaps unintentional, is that the concern of graduate workers should be how, or if, they will enter into a worker class that is, in and of itself, marginalized enough to warrant said position statement. Amongst the list of concerns about benefits, classroom resources, and voting rights,

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graduate workers are portrayed as workers in transit. The concerns of administrators and instructors—even while sympathetic towards the working conditions, compensation, etc. of NTTF—extend to the graduate worker only in terms of continued development, not of the resources that graduate workers receive from and contribute back to the university. It assumes that graduate workers should focus on their future employment status, not their current one, and on the value they will produce in the future, instead of the value they are currently producing.

I point out the absence of graduate workers issues in these two positions statements not to be critical of their content or intent—the two position statements do not set out to directly address graduate labor. And to be fair, the two groups are hardly synonymous. NTTF may be older, have more personal responsibilities, and have run out of runway in a career in higher education. NTT and adjunct faculty may have limited options available for advancement in higher education other than to achieve a tenure-track position. So, while there is room for advancement—though NTTF may argue not enough opportunity—the concerns expressed in the above position statements focus primarily on professional development and representation (mentorship, conducting research, manageable course loads, service and voting opportunities, etc.). Graduate workers face these same professional hurdles, while at the same time are categorized as developmental professionals and academics. Graduate workers are constantly in the process of professionalizing, a process that does not stop when they become a faculty member or even a worker in the private sector. But their status as a student subsumes their connection with other contingent faculty. Graduate workers need to be defined differently for their specific concerns to be addressed and for their labor to be acknowledged and properly valued.

Of course, if the notion that graduate students are walking a tightrope, constantly navigating between two identities in the eyes of other university stakeholders, has yet to truly permeate into the consciousness of graduate workers themselves, faculty and administrators can hardly be blamed for not providing a safety net. Timothy Reese Cain, in his history of faculty unions in the United States, traces the beginning of the formal graduate student collective bargaining to the late 1960s, though he notes that historically, assistants and other non-faculty were involved in organizing efforts long before then (56-58). Despite this long history of activism, there is certainly still work to be done in bringing the hidden, professional half of the graduate worker to the forefront and in “(a)dvancing definitions of themselves as more than students or apprentices” (Rhoades and Rhoads 163).

As activists and NTTF unionization efforts push for wage improvements, benefits, and other concessions from university administrations, the first step for graduate workers with similar goals is to address the rhetoric of apprenticeship and build towards a new definition of the graduate student worker as a professional and an employee. Before

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that can happen, however, graduate workers and other university stakeholders must come to recognize how the dual-positionality of graduate workers as both student and worker suppresses their identity as a laborer providing critical resources to the university. By looking more closely at the rhetoric expressed by graduate workers, faculty, and administrators, the under-discoursed rhetoric of graduate work can be more fully expressed.

The Apprentice: How Graduate Workers Perceive and are Perceived

As is the case with the CRC at CU Boulder, the arguments unions or advocacy groups forward offer the clearest articulation of how graduate workers self-identify and represent their dual-positionality. In a review of the public rhetoric of ten unionization efforts at different levels of administrative recognition, Rhoades and Rhoads found that graduate unions present their concerns as “multifaceted, based not only on the class position of employees as workers, but on their status as graduate students and future professionals” (175). Other studies on the cultural barriers to graduate worker unionization efforts have recognized that the demands of graduate workers are based on that duality. Graduate workers have mirrored efforts amongst NTTU by demanding better access to material resources and compensation, while at the same time also making demands unique to their position as both student and worker, such as asking faculty to take on larger mentorship roles both academically and professionally (Davis). Thomas Discenna, in his review of the rhetoric of the 1995 Yale University graduate worker strike, forwards a hegemonic logic of the apprentice as a way to frame how graduate workers straddle this line: “According to this hegemonic rhetoric, graduate employees serve as apprentices to the academy, learning the life of the mind from more senior faculty, with the expectation of assuming the responsibilities of a scholar at the completion of their training...while graduate students themselves worked to challenge the logic of apprenticeship, the underlying rhetoric of a life of the mind remained powerful enough to present an obstacle....” (24).

This hegemonic rhetoric of the apprentice might be expected from administrators and even some faculty members. While faculty and administrative attitudes towards the idea of a graduate worker rights movement are multifaceted and evolving, it has proven difficult for faculty to challenge their work-models and freedom for experimentation (Kezar and Maxey 19). Once beneficiaries of the system that employs graduate workers, it is hard for more privileged members of the faculty to challenge the notion of graduate workers as apprentices and of faculty as mentors instilling disciplinary mastery (Davis et al. 353). Although occasionally supportive, administrators have been found to display a sense of paternalism towards graduate worker unionization efforts. Administrators have also been shown to closely identify with their institution in ways not found amongst faculty and graduate workers. This close association

identifies “the university” with the administrative level, and necessarily positions the graduate worker as “not the university”—both attitudes that are perhaps instructive, given that even graduate workers view their position as a jumping-off point for other professional opportunities (Davis et al. 354).

Regardless of the language used by other university stakeholders, it is when the language of the apprentice is internalized and adopted by graduate workers themselves that their advocacy movements are undermined. Jennifer Sano-Franchini’s work on the emotional labor of the academic job market in rhetoric and composition paints a compelling portrait of the toll that being a graduate worker can take (and serves as another reminder of how prevalent the use of contingent faculty is in composition programs). Sano-Franchini uses Lauren Berlant’s concept of “cruel optimism” to frame how it feels for graduate workers to exist simultaneously as always on the job market and working in the same field. The “profound attachments” associated with the tenure track encourages candidates to “persist in a system wherein employment is not always available for all, where tenure does not always promise job security, and where working hard does not always result in a living wage” (104). This “emotional roller coaster” that graduate workers looking to advance their careers undergo is not limited to the time between applying for a position and receiving a rejecting letter or interview request. Sano-Franchini finds that graduate workers feel like they are always “on” and must perform professionalism and “participate in various professional development opportunities, maintain a professional website, and remain active on several social media sites.” (113). That this work is seen as performed or enacted, and not embodied within the identity of the graduate worker, is itself an acknowledgement that even graduate workers hoping to advance their careers view their current labor and professionalization efforts as a production—dressing up as a faculty member instead of pointing out that they also labor within the same department, field, university, and discourse community.

Graduate workers needs are different than other contingent faculty, and there is conflicting rhetoric found in how graduate workers express their identities, even as they seek to disrupt hiring practices and normative working conditions. By moving away from the rhetoric of apprenticeship and adopting language being used by the NTTF movement, graduate workers can more closely associate themselves with already working “professionals” in their field and position their dual-identity as a uniqueness that warrants distinct attention to that of other contingent faculty. The rhetoric of the apprentice is no longer (if it ever has) correctly applied to such a simultaneous position. A shift in the definition of who a graduate worker is, and what a graduate worker does, must begin to circulate amongst universities if the dual-positionality of the graduate worker is to be fully recognized.

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Redefining the Graduate Worker

Edward Schiappa of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in his book *Defining Reality*, calls these seemingly intractable perceptions—the conception of the graduate worker as an apprentice—*mundane definitions*. Schiappa writes, “A definition is mundane when it is used unproblematically by a particular discourse community” (29). *Novel definitions*, on the other hand, are “introduced when a person feels that the dominant mundane definition (formal or informal) is wrong or unhelpful. Thus, someone introducing a novel definition wants to change other people’s understanding and linguistic behavior away from the conventional patterns and toward new behaviors and understanding” (31). Key to our understanding of mundane and novel definitions is that defining something is a persuasive act, and while definitions can be scientific or clinical, they are also socially constructed and circulate because of an agreed-upon consensus. Schiappa writes:

Definitions represent claims about how certain portions of the world are. They are conventional and depend on the adherence of language users. Definitions function to induce denotative conformity, which is another way of saying that definitions are introduced or contended when one wants to alter others’ linguistic behavior...A successful new definition changes not only recognizable patterns of linguistic behavior but also our understanding of the world and the attitudes and behaviors we adopt toward various parts of that world. (32)

Definitions, in other words, are patterns of linguistic behavior that shape our behavior—but only when they are acceptable to a network of language users and reinforced through stakeholders. Definitions are, therefore, as Schiappa states, “tiny slices of reality...” that “are better understood as persuasive efforts that encourage intersubjective agreement about how to see the world. For a description to be accepted, people must be willing to “see” the similarity between the current phenomenon and a prototypical exemplar” (128-129). The only way to challenge that “thin slice of reality,” then, is to open a discourse community’s eyes to other novel definitions.

Mundane definitions become novel definitions when they enter what Schiappa terms a state of *definitional rupture*, a period that calls “our natural attitudes into question” (90). As the national and local attention to the use of NTTF makes clear, universities and colleges have already entered that period. Trish Jenkins, in a forum on organizing hosted by the National Council of Teachers of English, uses Schiappa’s framework to complicate the “at-will” status of NTTF while arguing for unionization as a means to more effectively question that designation.

In the case of the contingent faculty at my own university, the mundane definition of at-will employee affects their status. Although a novel definition has yet to be negotiated to replace this term, their chief negotiator believes that collective bargaining has led to refinements and limitations of the all-inclusive at-will definition, which has allowed an opportunity for the union to question—sometimes even test—assertions of at-will authority... Ideally, novel definitions will emerge, allowing us to work toward social realities that better serve contingent faculty. I believe that being organized provides the opportunity for these things to happen. (Jenkins et al. 455-56)

Inherent in Jenkins' critique of the "at-will" label is that the term implies a balance of power that does not exist in the dynamic between an "at-will" faculty member and their university. Notice too Jenkins' particular use of the phrase "emerge," which implies that other definitions are hidden and must be unearthed. While Jenkins was speaking live at a forum, and it would be unfair to parse her words too closely, her language, like that of the graduate student quoted during the CRC protest, is itself revealing, in that a different model of labor in higher education must be conceived and presented in order to disrupt the status quo.

The emergence I am suggesting, in the case of graduate workers in the U.S., is that of the worker and professional. In order to render themselves as a distinct category of worker, with concerns that are in some ways aligned with other contingent faculty but also distinct, graduate workers must reject the label of themselves as apprentices, and the conventions that come with it, and emerge instead as fully formed professionals with their dual status as student and worker supporting—not undercutting—the other. By looking at the rhetorical moves in the CRC's public literature that both acknowledges the graduate worker's dual-positionality and forwards new, novel definitions centered around professionalism, a pattern of similar definitional rupture emerges.

The CRC and Novel Definitions of the Graduate Worker

This is, of course, not to say the CRC comes out and states that their goal is to create a period of definitional rupture. However, taking a similar tact as earlier examinations of graduate worker unions, it is possible to see how the CRC is introducing a new definition of what it means to be a graduate worker. It is worth exploring the entirety of the CRC's website; however, for the purposes of looking at how the CRC's literature is pushing back against the mundane definition of apprenticeship, the section of their website entitled "Scope of our Labor" provides the best examples of their attempts to alter patterns of linguistic behavior. There, the CRC directly addresses some of the barriers to graduate unions. For example, one argument forwarded by administrators is that unions could cause interdepartmental and interdisciplinary friction. In countering this claim,

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the CRC writes, “You may think that a graduate employee union introduces antagonism between graduate employees and others within the university. This claim is a common talking point from administrators who seek to bust unions. It holds no water” (*Labor*). This direct call to solidarity is not surprising from a pro-union group like the CRC, but it does indirectly introduce a challenge to the student-first (or apprentice-first) definition of graduate workers, in that navigating within the university is part of professionalization. The CRC posits that this is no greater a concern for unions than it is for other members of the professional class, as there are unions, as well as other professional groups, available to faculty. By pointing out the assumed result of unionization, the CRC is directly addressing a barrier to collective organizing while connecting graduate workers to symbolized language and practices used by a group with higher status within higher education.

The vast majority of the CRC’s language speaks to the financial or quality of life issues of being a graduate student in an area with an increasingly high cost of living. The CRC frames this as an issue of social justice: “...a worker deserves a living wage for full-time work without reservation. Rewards beyond that may be appropriate for excellence, but all who work must be paid enough to live with dignity and security” (“*Labor*”).¹³ The effect of this language positions the CRC as fighting for the right to a living wage—a position also embraced by advocates for NTTF and other contingent faculty, as well as, in the words of the CRC, a great labor movement involving “the school teacher, the construction worker, the nurse, or the plumber” (“*Labor*”). By orienting themselves as professionals and laborers, primarily concerned with wages and benefits, the CRC places graduate workers under the umbrella of the professional class and complicates perceptions of graduate workers as apprentices. Their language also brings issues outside the academy into the definition of graduate worker that other faculty and workers in higher education contend with.

Most effectively, the CRC further connects graduate workers with other faculty through their introduction of a novel definition of who and what a graduate worker is and does. They offer a definition of graduate workers as employees pursuing *expertise development*. “The primary work of a teaching assistant is the same as the primary work of a research assistant: expertise development. Expertise development is the core of our employment, not an afterthought! Through research, teaching, and study,

¹³ See also their ending call to action: “If economics force your colleagues to exceed statutory occupancy limits on homes and therefore risk eviction; if the varying and mysterious dates of our pay cause them to incur late fees on rent and other bills; if the cost of daycare delays their graduation; if they need an expensive medical procedure that forces a choice between shelter and health... consider the benefits a union can bring and stand with us in the push for a better university” (“*Labor*”).

we are actively transforming ourselves into experts in our fields” (“Labor”). Reframing the dual-positionality of graduate student labor (studying and teaching, for example) as equal in importance, and all towards the overall goal of expertise development, aligns the interests of graduate workers with that of more established faculty (recall the position statements from the CCCC and NCTE). Expertise development in teaching and research is the goal of all faculty members, as well as university administration. As the CRC states: “We must reject the perspective that our labor is half time. That perspective diminishes the goal of our academic institution, namely expertise development, and promotes a situation which enables our abuse” (“Labor”). Benefits, housing, pay, mentorship, research opportunities, academic freedom—all of these concerns, whether expressed by NTTF, graduate workers, tenured faculty, or all three, fall under the umbrella of expertise development. To be sure, graduate workers are learning within and about their chosen field but are also simultaneously involved in a professional workforce.

Conclusion

On August 20 of this year, six months after the CRC’s initial walkout, the group announced via tweet that a CU Boulder task force had recommended to the university that student fees for graduate workers be waived. (At the time of this writing, it is unclear whether or not that policy will be implemented.) Despite not being formally recognized as a union by CU Boulder, there is no doubt that the CRC, through their initial protest and other work, brought this issue of fee waivers to the forefront. In connecting their labor and value to what is considered a more privileged class of worker in the discourse community of U.S. higher education, the CRC offers a concrete example of a new, novel definition of the graduate worker other than that of apprentice. Their focus on an issue specific to the concerns of the graduate worker, through adopting the rhetorical framing of professionalism, only highlights how graduate workers can more effectively represent their labor and value by steering into, not away from, their dual-positionality. Graduate workers occupy a unique position within higher education, but neither identity— that of student and worker— should be considered, in the words of the CRC, “half-time.” Workers seeking expertise (“Labor”) sounds like an apt definition of NTTF, adjuncts, tenure-track faculty, graduate workers, administrators, etc. With continued reflection on how graduate workers represent themselves and the rhetoric they use when advocating, even more novel definitions may appear, to the benefit of all.

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