

FORUM



Student demonstration against fees and cuts, Aberdeen. Credits: <http://anticuts.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Aberdeen-student-left-banner.jpg>

Anthropologists witnessing and reshaping the neoliberal academy

Edited by

Tracey HEATHERINGTON & Filippo M. ZERILLI

Contributions of

Virginia R. DOMINGUEZ, Sam BECK, Carl A. MAIDA, Martin A. MILLS, Berardino PALUMBO, Alan SMART, Ger DUIJZINGS, Alexis M. JORDAN & Shaheen M. CHRISTIE, Boone W. SHEAR, Alex KOENSLER & Cristina PAPA, THE RECLAIMING OUR UNIVERSITY MOVEMENT.

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The graduate student experience in the neoliberal academy

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The graduate student experience in the neoliberal academy

Alexis M. JORDAN

University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Shaheen M. CHRISTIE

University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

ABSTRACT: This commentary discusses graduate student perspectives on the disjuncture between the neoliberal framing of value as pursuit of economic profit and the academic community's pursuit of knowledge. Declining opportunities and the devaluing of different frames of knowledge and practice in the academy suppress graduate students' ability to contribute to their chosen fields of study and to create value in novel ways. Our participation as graduate students in the academic community, including organizations such as American Association of University Professors, has been instrumental in articulating the interconnect- edness of the systemic consequences that the neoliberal constitution of value has on the campus and community.

Introduction

The 2015-2017 state budget instituted drastic cuts to higher education in Wisconsin. While the threats to tenure, academic freedom, and shared govern- ance have been well documented (Buff 2015b; Hertzog 2016b; Savidge 2016; Strauss 2015), the circumstances of graduate students are often over- looked in broader discussions of the challenges faced by the University of Wisconsin (UW) System¹. As current anthropology PhD students at the Uni- versity of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), in this commentary we highlight impacts of declining state investment in higher education on our ability to carry out research and outline how our involvement in the American Associ- ation of University Professors (AAUP) links graduate student experiences with university- and community-wide efforts to promote the values associ-

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ated with Wisconsin higher education. In the context of coalition building, we advance the broader aim of protecting the university community as a space for intellectual innovation and freedom.

A consequence of the budget cuts is the decline in funding opportunities for graduate students, such as teaching assistantships, departmental scholarships, and work study positions in the College of Letters and Sciences. The increasing scarcity and contingency of such resources make it difficult to use the funds that are available for their intended purpose—a sustained focus on coursework, research, or dissertation writing. For example, while university fellowships are designed to reduce teaching loads in order to facilitate progress through the degree program, the uncertain fiscal climate prompts students to conserve stipends for future academic years rather than reduce their work hours in currently held positions. Fellowship guidelines require students to limit the number of work hours per week for on or off campus positions, which may result in a loss of earnings or position if the student accepts the fellowship. It may not be possible to risk losing employment that might disappear after the fellowship period is over, which may lead the student to decline a fellowship offer. This issue is especially acute for students from impoverished backgrounds, who have economic dependents, or whose research requires additional funding to carry out fieldwork and/or laboratory tests. Minority students in particular may be disproportionately affected by financial instability in higher education, which may result in fewer completed degrees in many academic fields (Aud 2010; Jaschik 2014; Nealy 2009; Sowell et al. 2016). For anthropology, this loss is particularly galling as our discipline is meant to explore the variety of humanity and include diverse perspectives.

Furthermore, funding opportunities are more than sources of income. Cuts to work study programs or research assistantships, for example, negatively impact the ability for graduate students to work with university faculty to hone the kinds of skills needed to pursue careers in or outside of the academy. Moreover, in some instances within the UW System, faculty have chosen to relocate to universities outside of Wisconsin in pursuit of stable economic environments and opportunities for their graduate students (Beckman 2016; Magnus 2016; Rocha 2016; Schneider 2016). These compounded issues result in less original research conducted as well as the loss of potential advisors, committee members, and mentors. As such, graduate students may find themselves unable to effectively assemble a committee to support their projects, or worry that they will have to face this outcome were they to enroll in a university system in crisis.

Of further concern to graduate students is the potential loss of UWM's Carnegie Classification as an R1 (top tier) research institution, a consequence that would be directly linked to the diminished ability for innovative original research to be conducted and completed, including work by graduate students. The administration has proudly touted the R1 mantle (Herzog 2016a; Swanson 2016; Walz-Chojnacki 2016), and completed research dissertations were an integral component to UWM being awarded this prestigious status. However, the reduction in funding and available research and teaching assistantships in the College of Letters and Science hinders the effectiveness of departments, the working conditions for graduate students conducting research, and the ability for students and faculty to engage across the university and surrounding communities in Milwaukee. The prioritization of perceived economic worth and efficiency over UWM mission of research and access (UW-Milwaukee 2017), devalues higher education experiences for graduate students in the UW System. It also undermines the goals of the Wisconsin Idea, a cornerstone of education in our state (Heatherington 2016), which holds that the university is for the benefit of all Wisconsin citizens (McCarthy 1912) and aims «to extend the boundaries of the university to the boundaries of the state» (Fleisher 2015).

Our growing awareness of the negative impacts the neoliberal model is having on our graduate student experiences led us to seek out a means by which to gain better insight into the inner workings of this approach at UWM and identify methods by which these impacts can be combatted. This aim ultimately led us to become members of UWM's recently reconstituted chapter (2015) of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). Comprised of academic staff, faculty, and graduate students, the AAUP is a professional academic organization standing for «academic freedom, shared governance, institutional independence, and economic security for all those employed in teaching, research, and academic support» (UWM AAUP 2017a). The UWM AAUP promotes and defends «higher education as a fundamental human right to which freedom of inquiry and expression are integral», and in particular, the defense of the «mission of UWM to provide democratic access to a first-class, Research 1 university to all of Wisconsin» (Buff 2016a).

In striving towards these values and engaging with the UWM and broader UW System administrations as well as the state legislature, UWM AAUP has become adept at recognizing the interconnected manner in which attacks on public education appear across various arenas of the UWM as well as across the university system. This awareness has aided the UWM AAUP chapter in identifying, documenting, and disseminating knowledge of the specific qual-

itative ways this damage has unfolded and how fiscal austerity continues to exacerbate these effects (Buff 2015b). Our participation in AAUP has allowed us to bring graduate student concerns to the forefront of conversations within the organization and better gauge the long-term impacts of further endeavors the university administrations and the state legislature seek to implement. Over the past two years the UWM AAUP has also identified other organizations and populations, both within the university and the larger Milwaukee community, that share in the commitment to protecting public education and the problem of doing so in a state that continues to devalue it. Accordingly, the UWM AAUP has worked to build solidarity amongst these bodies on a number of issues, most frequently in the development of strategies that aim to protect and promote public education from «K-PhD» (kindergarten through the doctoral degree) (UWM AAUP 2017b; Buff 2016b). UWM AAUP stands against the recurring propositions of tuitions hikes for students, which would make higher education impossible for more and more students in Wisconsin, particularly some of the urban population of Milwaukee with school districts containing high rates of poverty (Anderson 2016; Buff 2015a). The organization collaborated with Milwaukee Teachers Education Association (MTEA) to protest the state legislature's law (Opportunity Schools Partnership Program) which privatized Milwaukee Public Schools, making underperforming institutions answerable to private corporations contracted to manage them rather than local Milwaukee residents (Buff 2015b). As UWM AAUP moves into its third year since its reformulation, the organization's efforts continue to expand and build new coalitions that create inter-group awareness and support. This ongoing mission to engage with more potential allies allows us to amplify our voices and raise public awareness of the state of education in Wisconsin (UWM AAUP 2017b). We, as individual graduate students and as UWM AAUP members, hope that our collective efforts will result in long-term strategies that promote the survival and flourishing of our university and the communities with which we share a bond and purpose.

Ultimately, our experiences as graduate students, anthropologists, and AAUP members at UWM have made it clear to us that the continuing erosion of public education in Wisconsin has the potential to demolish the essential funding, skills, and academic support necessary for successful graduate education programs. Accordingly, this increases the odds that Wisconsin will lose current and potential future graduate students unable or unwilling to attempt or complete degrees in an increasingly unstable environment. Such

an outcome is especially likely for disciplines like anthropology, whose goals do not easily fit models of economic profit, and consequently are more likely to be targeted by state cuts. Consequently, we have come to view our continued cognizance of and active engagement with the political and social forces seeking to shape public education as vital components of what it means to be professional scholars and anthropologists. Only through the normalization of these undertakings within academia can we hope to ensure the survival of higher education as a force for intellectual inquiry and public good.

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