

Academic Labor

IJoC

Four Myths About Academic Labor

AMY M. PASON

University of Nevada, Reno

We have been forced to confront the “value” of communication studies due to recent legislative attacks on union rights and continued higher education budget cuts. To advocate successfully for better working conditions and job security, we must confront myths underwriting administrative and public opinion defining our “worth” as academic laborers. Our current practices work from assumptions that (1) our labor market operates with fair supply–demand logics; (2) our success is defined by an achievable promotional ladder; (3) the liberal arts are not as valuable as other fields; and (4) academic work is not the same as other labor. The above myths should be confronted if we wish to secure and protect our disciplinary work.

The call of this special section to confront the realities of academic labor (especially in the field of Communication Studies) is long overdue. Professional associations and practitioners alike seemingly ignore serious consequences of instructional labor retrenchment and casualization, accepting bad job markets and budget cuts as inevitable. Individual departments find their hands tied, relying on last-minute adjunct hires to cover course loads because they do not have full-time faculty to support student demand, while many exceptional academics bounce from job to job as budgets allow. Where is our collective power to resist the casualization eroding our field and the instruction we can offer?

Frustratingly, communication professional organizations offer little help and otherwise perpetuate rhetoric undermining collective resistance. I belong to the National Communication Association (NCA), and although Bochner (2008) called members to discuss administrative policy that “encourages” the use of contingent faculty and saddles tenured faculty with (uncompensated) administrative duties, this branch of the communication field is characterized by “an overall critical inattention” to academic labor (Discenna, 2010). The official NCA response to the state of academic labor came in the November 2010 issue of *Spectra*: the theme across articles seemed to accept current economic conditions as a reality *to be adapted to* rather than problematic practices *that should be changed*. Although there are numerous arguments linking the decline of tenure to declining educational standards (see for example Nelson, 2010), in *Spectra* Taylor (2010) comfortably suggests that non-tenure-track faculty and graduate students will do most of the teaching while tenured faculty merely supervise, even though communication degrees have increased by 63% in the last decade. This scenario indicates that more students will be taught by fewer tenured faculty, and it is a situation unlikely to change with casualized tenure-track positions and graduates who leave academia all together. Atkin (2010) advises faculty to guide graduate students to

non-academic positions, acknowledging the shrinking numbers of tenured positions. Should we accept this “reality” of academic labor even as it threatens the very existence of the communications field in the academy?

Public opinion becomes more critical of the costs of education, yet our professional associations offer few resources to protect our employment. Organizing as a graduate student at the University of Minnesota (U of M), I was perceived as irrational and greedy for demanding job security and fair wages. Like those affected by Wisconsin governor Scott Walker’s anti-union legislation, U of M clerical, technical, and health care workers who went on strike in 2007 were told to “take one for the team” due to budget cuts, even though they merely demanded wage increases to meet inflation. Public educators are also told they are overpaid and clearly do not care about students if they strike. Similarly, many of us who supported the 2007 strike were instrumental in protesting increased graduate student fees in 2009—along with being told we were privileged and should give money back to the university through fees, we were told to deal with low pay now as better tenure-track jobs awaited us. If public opinion is hesitant to fund instructors and staff providing education, then it makes it easier for administrations to justify instructional cuts overall.

Far too many educators and administrators *do* accept current labor conditions, placing blame on legislators or external factors. The examples above are endemic to problematic rhetoric preventing us from confronting actual economic conditions and urging us to accept rhetorical myths and ideals of how we *think* labor works. My goal is to demystify these long-held assumptions so that members of our field, if not our professional organizations, can be critical and advocate for the labor conditions we do wish to see in our own universities and across the profession. Although I lay out the following claims in absolute terms, I do recognize there are exceptions to these rules and that not all universities/administrations react to economic crisis in the same way. At the same time, in true union spirit, these are the realities for many places, and what occurs in one workplace does affect the rest.

Myth 1: There Is a Job Market For Which You Must Be Competitive

As a graduate student, I spent much of my time assessing my own value—literally what was I “worth”? Had I done enough to make myself competitive for the much-emphasized job market? In my time on “the market,” horrific rumors of how “tight” or “bad” the market was pervaded all discussions by my colleagues. Rumored was that older faculty were not retiring and opening up tenure-track lines or that publication expectations have risen so much that one needs a book even to be considered by a search committee. In reality, numerous tenure-track positions were advertised—then canceled—because of budget cuts, being replaced by last-minute “visiting,” one-year lecturer, or adjunct positions. Perhaps this is a similar “fake” market to what Cary Nelson (foreword to Bousquet, 2008) admonishes the Modern Language Association for perpetuating: presuming tenure position availability is based on meeting instructional demand even though instructional demand has been increasingly met by graduate student and adjunct labor. In other words, the job market we *assume* to exist is not the one operating in practice. Although we should make ourselves “marketable” for possible employment by being productive instructors and researchers, we also have to recognize the positions available are directly caused by administrative decisions and not invisible market forces.

NCA's position on the "market" should equally be admonished as it plays into neoliberal logics placing blame on individuals for their own employment potential. To be "competitive" means graduate students should be trained in both quantitative and qualitative methods (even as tenure-track descriptions become more specialized) and should publish articles in "well placed" journals before graduation (see Atkin, 2010). Atkin asserts we have "over-produced" PhDs for the available positions, so all should look for employment outside of academia as well. Given this reasoning, if one does not do enough to compete for limited permanent positions, it is one's own fault and choice to exist on adjunct positions. Moreover, it is the field's fault for training so many graduate students even though we rely on their teaching to meet increased student demand. Again, we are laboring under false realities and perpetuating our own job market myth.

Bousquet (2008) exposes a truer version of academic labor. Unlike our ideal that most undergraduates take courses from tenured faculty, Bousquet shows nearly 75% of university instruction is conducted by graduate students and non-tenured faculty. Instead of overproducing PhDs, programs produce "just enough" lower-priced graduate students to teach introductory courses. For administrations concerned with the bottom line, graduate students provide a logical, continuous stream of cheap labor as more graduate students are ready to replace the ones who graduate, and the more courses can be covered by cheaper graduates and adjuncts, the less we need tenure-track positions at all. When faculty retire, those tenure-track lines do not open up to newly minted PhDs—they are eliminated and lost, opening up only contingent course-by-course positions. Although "visiting" professor positions provide a year of security and benefits, the visitor has no home institution to return to. The "real" job market is based on how many positions administrations allow departments to keep (because of budgets), and not because of (quality) instructional needs.

As tuition and fees increase along with increasing student enrollment, it is perplexing why administrative reactions to budget cuts are less about keeping the quality of education alive through stable faculty employment, cheapening instructional labor overall. As Bousquet (2008) forecasts, only a third of PhD earners will find tenure-track employment; producing fewer PhDs does not actually translate into increasing availability of those positions. At the same time as full-time faculty positions decrease due to budgets, it seems campuses are booming with new buildings, stadiums, and administrative positions. My fellow graduate organizers at the U of M held particularly contemptuous views of then-President Bruininks, who prioritized building a football stadium and creating administrative positions over wages for workers and instructors. Administrative positions at the U of M increased by 52 % where a dozen employees earned nearly \$3.2 million in wages alone (Kennedy, 2011), while the lowest-paid campus workers were denied wage increases. Bruininks' administrative bloat follows trends of other universities, where pretty buildings and administrators attract funding dollars and presumably denote better universities—leaving many of us wondering where the original mission of the university has gone. Again, we are looking for a job market for instructional labor even though administrations are largely not working to create or keep those positions.

Administrations benefit the more instructional labor buys into the job market myth. Whenever academic laborers *do* raise questions on how education is affected by the use of graduate students or contingent faculty, we are reminded to be happy we have a job at all. Those without a tenure-track

position are told someday a “better” job market will come, however that market is manipulated and priced by administrative practices (Nelson, 1997). Meanwhile, departments “do more (teaching) with less (money)” without having much recourse to argue they *need* more full-time faculty to operate, lest they be cut completely to save university expense. Instead of throwing up our hands to “bad” job market years beyond our control, we should be working to defend (even create) tenure-track or full-time instructional positions to support quality instruction in the classroom and quality of life for the members of our field.

Myth 2: There Is a Ladder to Climb

The second predominant myth, related to the first, is that the norm for academic positions is similar to the ideal corporate ladder. We pay our dues, learning along the way, advancing from apprentice graduate student through the ranks to become a professor with tenure. The ladder metaphor implies someone at the bottom is paid less for roughly doing the same work as a tenured professor—again, paying present dues to have more gainful future employment. With a majority of instruction being done by graduate students and adjuncts, in practice, the ladder is more of a maze, with horizontal rather than vertical advancement. Graduate students are primary instructors rather than apprentices, although lower wages for graduate and adjunct instructors are justified because of presumed lack of experience and better future employment to come. Not only should we attempt to gain back tenure-track positions to reinstate some ladder system, but we also have to work to better the conditions for graduate and adjunct instructors.

Admittedly, I’ve worked my way through my own maze of academic employment and was disillusioned from any notion of a “ladder” my first semester as a MA student. Although I had some mentoring (mainly from other graduate students), I was teaching my own section of public speaking mere months after being an undergraduate. As a PhD student, I was in the role of primary instructor mentoring my own colleagues, who served as my teaching assistants. Then I supplemented my graduate instruction by teaching adjunct classes to get my foot in the door at other institutions before becoming a visiting assistant professor on a one-year contract at yet another institution. Due to budget cuts and regardless of exceptional reviews by my department chair, I went from a visiting assistant professor to a lecturer at a different institution before finally getting a tenure-track contract. My reality does not match an apprentice model touted by administrations justifying lower pay for graduate students, which Watt (1997) and others have contended has not existed since the 1970s for most disciplines. Instead of climbing a ladder, I had to take steps forward and back to get to a tenure contract. The new norm of instructional labor is graduate and adjunct instructors teaching exceptionally—without much pay or job security—even though many of the communication skill courses they teach are service courses contributing to central university missions.

Bousquet (2008) contends it is important to organize as graduate students because it is likely the only stable employment many academics will ever know. Through graduate unionization efforts, many graduate students now have health insurance along with stipends for teaching—some graduate instructors actually make *more* than their adjunct counterparts because of these benefits (Berube, 1997). Importantly, increasing the pay and value for those at the bottom of the presumed ladder also aids in increasing pay and value for those higher up the ladder. However, graduate unionizing has been challenged to prevent this from occurring—warranted by the myth of better, future employment. In the U

of M graduate student fees protest in 2009, organizers argued that paying fees gave the university back about 10% of graduates' stipend pay, but a spokesperson for the university stated graduate students should not be concerned about their present wages because "This is part of their academic career; nobody's going to be a TA or RA for 20 years. . . . It's a step in their education" (cited in Potts, 2009). Graduate student unionizers know their present position is a step, but they also know future employment prospects may not compensate for wages lost in the present.

The ladder myth works to keep up the *hope* that better employment will come if we work hard enough—and obscures administrative practices relying on this false hope. Graduate students are paid less *now* because they are relying on an ideal future salary. Adjunct faculty are kept on a short leash and continue to teach well *now* in the hopes of more stable future positions. This is not to suggest that all who pursue graduate education should be or should want to be tenured professors committed to research *and* teaching, but it emphasizes that all levels of instructional labor deserve stable, fair conditions. Instructional quality increases when an educator spends more time developing lessons than searching for the next position or worrying about finances. Especially for the communication courses serving university-wide programs, we should recognize that our instructors deserve more than course-by-course contracts. The ladder is not a bad ideal, but the current "ladder" is more a maze. We need to stop discounting our present-day situations assuming something better is to come.

Myth 3: The Liberal Arts Are Less Valuable Than Other Fields

Perhaps we are complacent about academic labor because we have bought into a myth that we are paid what we are worth on the imagined academic market. Public attention to rising tuition costs attempts to assign investment return value on different majors—liberal arts graduates earn far less than engineering graduates (Whoriskey, 2011), thus, by extension, liberal arts instruction should also cost less. More problematic, when liberal arts programs are threatened to be cut, public opinion is less likely to challenge such cuts because the liberal arts are considered unnecessary in comparison to science and engineering. Common sense blames liberal arts majors and practitioners for choosing an occupation they *knew* destined them to precarious employment and poverty. This public sentiment takes away our right to defend our jobs and the liberal arts, convincing us to accept our seemingly inevitable lot in life. However, we must recognize we do bring value to a university and do have the right to advocate.

Although we know education is more complex than return-on-investment logics dictate, we should not be quick to discount public sentiment as mere rhetoric. During the 2007 U of M worker strike, the administration was unmoved and refused to consider petitions by faculty and students on behalf of workers; thus public opinion becomes the only force to hold administrations accountable. However, public arguments support administrations rather than side with university workers. In the 2009 U of M student fees protests, opponents argued graduate students should stop complaining because if they wanted to make money, they should have gotten a degree in engineering instead. Arguing against liberal arts graduates, some suggested English or Art should only be pursued as hobbies on the side, although no one would notice if Art were eliminated anyway. Moreover, graduates were paid what they were worth since, unlike President Bruininks, who earned his \$700,000 salary, graduate students merely oversee just a "dozen or so" 18-year-olds (see comment section in Potts, 2009). Regardless that graduate students just

wanted to limit the money they gave back to the university from their living stipend, and that most of us can't remember when we *just* taught a *dozen* or so undergraduates, if the public does not see a problem with pay inequities or cutting liberal arts, then why should we? Clearly, we should pay the university itself for the contributions we make in teaching and service, and we are in the wrong for even bringing up the issue.

Part of being satisfied with the salaries we are assigned (at whatever teaching level) is that we put faith into a university system presumably operating under traditional supply and demand or at least presume we are being paid comparably to *other* liberal arts scholars. The reality of academic labor value is more complex, with some institutions paying adjuncts \$2,000 per public speaking class while others pay \$4,000 or more. Within universities, rubrics based on administrative constructed meritocracies justify paying professors in one department based on the projected funding and reputation rankings a "star academic" might bring, while relying on cheap teaching labor in other departments (see the U of M's use of Strategic Positioning in Pason, 2008). In short, we should question how value is assigned throughout the university while advocating for more equitable pay across the board.

Although engineers will probably always earn more than liberal arts majors outside of the academy, changing how we understand the value of the liberal arts might start with changing administrative practices pricing employment within the university. For example, Nelson (foreword to Bousquet, 2008) advocates limits to administrative pay to \$300,000, with higher-end faculty salaries being capped at \$200,000. My visiting position was at a fully unionized institution, with transparent rubrics determining one's salary based on experience and position. At the same institution, budget cuts were dealt with by a university-wide effort instead of decisions being made by a few administrators with all the power. Perhaps if we reduce inequities within our universities, we can make a case to the public that all fields are valued equally.

Myth 4: We Are Not Workers

What I have been suggesting by exposing the above myths is also that we must work to organize ourselves as workers against trends eroding academic labor. Radically, we must recognize academic labor is not different from other forms of labor: we are workers (Mattson, 2003). Our worker status conveniently comes into play when administrations reprimand and quell unionizing efforts on the premise we are university employees. However, the moment faculty invoke worker status to unionize, they are reminded that collegial relationships and professionalism supersedes any worker status (Berube, 1997; Discenna, 2010). It is our subject position as *workers* that allows us to advocate for our working conditions, so we should claim to be workers.

Convincing ourselves we are workers is a challenge in itself because many of us switch from identity to identity based on the nature of our work. Sometimes we see ourselves as *students* gaining an education. Sometimes we see ourselves as *teachers* belonging to a community of other communication instructors. Sometimes we see ourselves as *researchers* contributing to our wider academic discipline. Less often, we might see ourselves as members of our *campus community*, where we are active in

administration or the general working conditions at our home institutions. Importantly, we should not allow these various subject positions to divide us or our ability to act collectively when jobs are at stake.

The division of subject positions undermining advocacy became clear in the 2007 worker strike at the U of M. Those who saw themselves foremost as *teachers* crossed picket lines to serve students, while faculty who prioritized their role as *researchers* for their various fields continued laboring removed from the workers' struggles. For those of us wanting to support the strike, we were reminded by administration of our role as *workers*—non-unionized workers—who could not legally join strike efforts. Given this, it was harder to convince other students and faculty the strike was also *their* fight, and that they, too, were workers. In other graduate student unionization efforts, the right to organize as workers has been denied because *students* cannot be considered employees even when they are under contract to teach their own courses (Jessup, 2003). Professional identifications have some faculty swearing more allegiance to disciplines at large instead of recognizing the working conditions at their own institutions. Our professional associations clearly are not protecting jobs at individual institutions; thus it is up to us to advocate for ourselves.

In large measure, any effort at organizing requires building alliances and showing that one's individual working conditions affect another's (Robin & Stephens, 1997). Decreasing clerical positions increases administrative loads on regular faculty. Increasing administrative loads on faculty decreases mentoring time with graduate students, and so on. The common denominator: we are all *workers*. Even in exposing these myths, it is hard to prescribe clear prescriptions for next steps. Certainly, those with the most job security should support those without the comfort of tenure by advocating for permanent, not contingent, instructional labor. Our focus should be less on creating graduate students competitive for fake job markets and to advocate and protect instructional labor across the board against administrative cuts. At minimum, we should stop accepting and adapting to the situation *as it is* and recognize that *it can be changed*. We should start to recognize our power to work together, *as workers*, to reclaim the ideal of education.

References

- Atkin, C. (2010, November). Training the communication researcher of the future. *Spectra*, 16–18.
- Berube, M. (1997). The blessed of the Earth. In C. Nelson (Ed.), *Will teach for food: Academic labor in crisis*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Bochner, A. (2008, March). An impoverished professoriate and the future of tenure. *Spectra*, 3–4.
- Bousquet, M. (2008). *How the university works: Higher education and the low-wage nation*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Discenna, T. A. (2010). The rhetoric of graduate employee unionization: Critical rhetoric and the Yale Grade Strike. *Communication Quarterly*, 58(1), 19–35. doi: 10.1080/01463370903489149
- Jessup, L. (2003). The campaign for union rights at NYU. In B. Johnson, P. Kavanaugh, & K. Mattson (Eds.), *Steal this university: The rise of the corporate university and the academic labor movement*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kennedy, T. (2011, June 29). U fights charges of top heavy-staffing. *Star Tribune* (online). Retrieved from <http://www.startribune.com/local/124686258.html>
- Mattson, K. (2003). How I became a worker. In B. Johnson, P. Kavanaugh, & K. Mattson (Eds.), *Steal this university: The rise of the corporate university and the academic labor movement*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nelson, C. (1997). Introduction: Between crisis and opportunity: The future of the academic workplace. In C. Nelson (Ed.), *Will teach for food: Academic labor in crisis*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Nelson, C. (2010, Winter). Why college students need professors with tenure. *The Key Reporter (Phi Beta Kappa)*, 6.
- Pason, A. (2008). We are all workers: A class analysis of university labour strikes. *Ephemera*, 8(3), 322–330. Retrieved from <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/8-3/8-3pason.pdf>
- Potts, I. (2009, February 2). Some grad students protest “exorbitant” fees. *Minnesota Daily* (online). Retrieved from <http://www.mndaily.com/2009/02/02/some-grad-students-protest-exorbitant-fees>
- Robin, M., & Stephens, M. (1997). Against the grain: Organizing TAs at Yale. In C. Nelson (Ed.), *Will teach for food: Academic labor in crisis*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press.

Taylor, J. (2010, November). Rapid change as the constant: The undergraduate degree of the near future. *Spectra*, 8–11.

Watt, S. (1997). On apprentices and company towns. In C. Nelson (Ed.). *Will teach for food: Academic labor in crisis*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press.

Whoriskey, P. (2011, March 23). On path to riches, no sign of fluffy majors. *The Washington Post* (online). Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/if-money-matters-this-report-is-a-major-deal/2011/05/23/AF7r459G_story.html