

The 1960s Origins of the Academic Labor “Crisis”

Annual conventions and program revisions have made talk of graduate student education, labor, and [cost](#) particularly frothy in the last month or two. Interestingly, discussions of the graduate school mess are beginning to test the familiar narrative formula in which neoliberal administration + faculty complacency + lamentable economic events = really bad times for freshly minted PhDs. As a result, it has become newly possible to discern how growth strategies of the 1960s share responsibility for the current fix. The legendary campus radicals of '68, it now seems necessary to recall, included graduate students who, as nominally temporary apprentices, assumed permanent responsibility for large chunks of the research university's undergraduate curriculum.

Although they may not identify it as such, recent developments reveal this legacy when they expose the dependency of research specialization on graduate student labor. In December, for instance, Johns Hopkins joined the likes of Stanford and the CUNY Grad Center in recasting the funding model for PhDs by providing summer support and cutting down time to degree. To this increasingly common formula Hopkins adds the goal of chopping PhD enrollments by 25% over five years. “To compensate for fewer graduate students available to teach undergraduate course discussion sections,” Colleen Flaherty reported in [Inside Higher Ed](#), “Hopkins plans to hire more teaching assistants with master's degrees.” Graduate students joined faculty in protesting this approach, arguing that a “critical mass” is necessary for smaller graduate programs especially to stay alive. Debate about shrinking PhD programs at the MLA yielded similar concerns (as [Scott Jaschik](#) recounts). Looking past the familiar problem of too many PhDs or too few tenure track lines, this concern helps

draw renewed attention to the long-standing dynamic in which graduate student labor provides a critical leg of the triangle connecting research specialization with undergraduate instruction. Beyond the balancing of professional inputs and outputs, fundamental departmental labor and instructional models are at issue.

A related insight comes from recent historical analyses of job market trends. For instance, the statistician known as [Adjunct Nate Silver](#) looks at PhDs in the famously beleaguered field of German. Starting from 1960-61, he notes, “the number of Ph.D.s earned each year tripled by 1966-67, and doubled again by 1972-73.” Grad student enrollments went up in part to address the demand for professors predicted by growing undergraduate enrollments, but undergraduate growth was not nearly fast enough to keep pace with the proliferation of PhDs: “Between fall 1959 and fall 1969, total [undergraduate] enrollments jumped from 3.6 million to over 8 million. But a jump of 120% in enrollments didn’t in itself call for an increase of over 500% in the number of Ph.D.s in German.” The sense of a job market collapse in the 1970s was created not by economic contraction, Adjunct Nate concludes, but by the hyperactive PhD creation of the 1960s, combined with ill-conceived changes in the way the MLA advertised positions (or the lack thereof). After the late 60s boom and bust, the market was relatively stable for the next 30 years, with departments cranking out new German professors in numbers roughly proportional to positions advertised. Only after 2008 does a dramatic shift in this pattern occur, due a steep decline in the number of available tenure track lines.

As Adjunct Nate Silver points out, the period from around 1960 to the present is not simply a chapter in the history of the academic job market. Rather, it *is* the history of the academic job market, at least for key humanities disciplines. As Marc Bousquet has also observed (in [How the University Works](#)), the 1960s were the period that invented the apparatus of national

searches for faculty lines that allows and encourages us to perceive this labor market as one. The MLA introduced the conference-based "Job Mart" in 1955 in an effort to replace the old-boy network as the primary hiring mechanism ("Hello, Professor Jones? Professor Smith here. We're hiring. Send over your brightest boy in Romanticism, won't you?"). In 1969, the Job Mart system "'broke down' because the problem 'was now one of locating jobs rather than candidates'" (Association of Departments of English qtd. in Bousquet 192). The MLA's notorious Job Information List replaced it.

There is more to the 1960s labor story, however, than an increase in the number (and variety) of PhDs and the development of new mechanisms for marketing them. This was the period that made graduate student teaching assistants essential functionaries of research university departments.

In a 1967 *Administrative Science Quarterly* special issue devoted to "Universities as Organizations," research professor of sociology Robert Dubin and research assistant Frederic Beisse argued that 1960s student activism had its principal source in the position and function of graduate assistants ("[The Assistant: Academic Subaltern](#)"). The TAs were led to revolt due to a fundamental organizational "disjunction": they had been given the teaching responsibilities of faculty without corresponding legitimation of their authority and perquisites to carry them out (522). The authors provide an historical trend analysis involving ratios of students to faculty and teaching assistants. In this way, they demonstrate that public research universities turned to graduate students to accommodate massive enrollment growth in the 50s and 60s.

In describing increasing reliance on TAs as part of the overall growth strategy characteristic of the university during the period of booming faculty employment, confident welfare state administration, and ascendant left intellectuals, Dubin and Beisse provide an alternative etiology for the well publicized troubles of late twentieth

and early twenty-first century graduate students.

In the late 90s, academic humanists began to see reliance on graduate student instructors as part of the “causualization” of the academic workforce, a centerpiece of neoliberal administrative strategies that overwhelmed higher education in the wake of the 1970s economic crises. Graduate student exploitation, on this view, was the flip side of heavy-handed administration that, in the name of budget control, also constrained the growth and authority of tenure-line faculty.

In contrast, Dubin and Beisse diagnose increased use of TAs as reprising a familiar pattern in professional divisions of labor. In their view, the phenomenon illustrated a generally accepted principle:

Whenever there is pressure on an established occupation or profession to provide more services, and the demand cannot be met through normal expansion of the supply of certified experts, then portions of the skill will be shifted, by a division of labor, to lower skilled and lower status work colleagues. (545)

They offer, for example, the devolution of skills in medicine “from doctor to registered nurse to practical nurse to aide, or from doctor to technician” (545). This pattern is so obvious, according to the Dubin and Beisse, that we should marvel at the ability of faculty, administrators, and graduate students to avoid acknowledging that they were in the process of creating a new occupational class and deskilling undergraduate teaching. They sidestepped the issue through the idea of “apprenticeship.” By understanding graduate student teaching as a temporary state leading to mature participation in the profession, 60s faculty and administrators could pretend that the division of labor had not changed and hope that graduate students would outgrow their rebelliousness.

“The collective action of the sort employed by the assistants

at Berkeley, while effective, is the antithesis of professional behavior,” Dubin and Beisse caution. “The long-term effects may be to produce a generation of professors whose notions of professional behavior and decorum differ sharply from those of the present generation” (546). While seeing the power of graduate student unionization, they have greater hope that undergraduate dissatisfaction will force change. Perhaps undergraduate complaints about the quality of TA-led classes would prompt administrators to reverse the trend and force faculty back into classrooms.

That did not happen. Graduate student unions succeeded at a range of public universities in the 1970s. On private campuses, however, the National Labor Relations Board refused to recognize graduate students as employees who could form unions before the year 2000. In all types of research institutions, TAs remain essential to staffing undergraduate curricula. The view of their work as apprenticeships has proven remarkably durable. It survived even the 1990s bait-and-switch that established the graduate student labor crisis as a humanities problem. In 1989, the infamous Bowen Report, “Prospect for Faculty in the Arts and Sciences,” suggested that retirements and enrollment growth would create “a substantial excess demand for faculty.” As a result, a susceptible proportion of college graduates (including us) were encouraged to pursue PhDs in the humanities. Report author William G. Bowen, however, had neglected to take the growing reliance on part-time workers into account (as Denise Magner explains [here](#).) When the demand he predicted failed to materialize, many aspirants found themselves prepared for jobs that did not exist. Calls to reform graduate education and employment practices became increasingly urgent.

“It is time to say, bluntly, that graduate education is losing its moral foundation,” Cary Nelson and Michael Bérubé declared in 1995 ([Higher Education Under Fire](#) 20). In light of the flat job market for English PhDs, the proposition that graduate

teaching assistantships were actually apprenticeships was in peril. Rather, it increasingly seemed that poorly compensated graduate student teachers were propping up a bankrupt system, which valued research productivity over teaching. In order to maintain their privileges, humanities professors were willing to throw their graduate students under the bus. English was in a particularly perilous position according to Nelson and Bérubé, because it had been singled out in 1980s and 90s attacks on “theory” and “political correctness.” It offered the popular press, state legislators, and university administrators a convenient scapegoat for the phenomenon of non-teaching faculty that was, in truth, much more pronounced in the sciences. Where Dubin and Beisse imagine political pressure from undergraduates might bring graduate exploitation to an end, Nelson and Bérubé hope that heightened awareness from faculty and administrators will solve the crisis. Failing to generate a groundswell of substantive “top-down” reforms, the authors soon gave their full-throated support to reenergized graduate student unionization efforts.

Meanwhile, professional associations in the period tended to double-down on the idea of apprenticeship and to respond to the plight of graduate students through (mostly ineffective) efforts to defend tenure ([Doe and Palmquist](#)). The perceived problem was not that faculty and administrators had grown accustomed to a division of labor that relied on a “subaltern” class of professionals, but rather that administrators had figured out how to control costs by shifting instruction to non-tenure earning lines. If Nelson and Bérubé saw in this dynamic a moral crisis for the humanities, other commentators like Bousquet discerned an epochal political-economic shift arising, in part, from the failures of “Fordist” management in the 1960s. Bousquet described “flexible faculty” as “just one dimension” in a post-Fordist mutation “of the university into an efficient and thoroughly accountable environment through which streaming education can be made available in the way that information is delivered: just in time, on demand, in

spasms synchronized to the work rhythm of student labor on the shop floor” (44). Here, the TA provides a bellwether for the university’s sinister new project to fuel an even more alienating form of capitalism through the one-two punch of workforce realignment (causalization) and ideological warfare (informationalization).

Eschewing apocalyptic pronouncements for the comfortable neutrality of bureaucratic prose, no less an authority than the National Center for Education Statistics was, by 2009, prepared to certify the workforce realignment part of this narrative. That year, the Digest reported a 59% increase in the number of part-time faculty and a 48% percent increase in graduate assistant employees between 1997 and 2007. It also reported a corresponding decline in the percentage of faculty with tenure from 56% in 1993-94 to 49% in 2007-08 (270). In addition to indicating that the university had blazed a trail into a terrifying new era, the trend was also susceptible to description as a new type of management challenge. To address this “new normal,” commentators of various stripes maintain, faculty need to be more willing to organize, and humanities PhDs need missions other than traditional faculty appointments (see, e.g, this in the [New York Times](#)). One important variation on this theme asks us to embrace the reality that the PhD already credentials graduates for jobs outside academe, a conclusion confirmed by a recent [study](#) by the American Historical Association.

Dubin and Beisse’s largely forgotten 1967 argument suggests that insistence on the relative novelty of the trend may be one reason graduate education and employment seem so difficult to reform. When they interpret the shift of undergraduate instructional responsibility to graduate student TAs as a predictable outcome of the university’s rapid postwar growth, they beg the question: How is it that this new division of labor could sustain the American research university for decades while continuing to appear temporary and illegitimate?

Read in tandem with Dubin and Beisse, Nelson and Bérubé's 1995 account provides a kind of answer. In contrast to their forebears, Nelson and Bérubé do not associate reliance on TAs with the "deskilling" of undergraduate instruction. The authors are struck, rather, by the ever-increasing demands placed on educators of all sorts, and note that newly minted PhDs find themselves required to publish more to land a job than many professors would have been expected to produce in their entire careers in the 1970s. Nonetheless, like Dubin and Beisse in 1967, they expect their colleagues to bristle at the impolite admission that a less prestigious and well-compensated professional class exists. "For decades American universities have fostered a kind of *idiot savant* academic culture," they observe. "Faculty members maintain expertise in their disciplines but remain mostly ignorant about how the university works" (Nelson and Bérubé 25). Who among us has not, on occasion, felt compelled to bemoan the ignorance of their coworkers? The particular ignorance at issue here, however, is the habitual sort. It is shared, to some extent, by those who would dispel it.

When Dubin and Beisse and Nelson and Bérubé chide their colleagues, they insinuate that the faculty have been irresponsible or incapable caretakers, unable or unwilling to shelter their charges from administrative zeal to contain costs while increasing student enrollments. What Dubin and Beisse know about professionalism or Nelson and Bérubé know about class analysis does not keep them from recapitulating the very apprenticeship model that their arguments show to be outmoded.

In myriad ways, *undergraduate* instruction after the 1960s stopped idealizing this kind of relationship between teacher and student. Increasingly, undergraduates were treated as mature economic agents. At a relatively young age, they were expected to make life-changing choices regarding institutions, programs of study, and levels of debt obligation with a cool

eye to the project of securing themselves a future. Professors and other experts would guide their choices, but not assume responsibility for their outcomes. Perhaps largely because of graduate education's critical role in disciplinary reproduction, however, professors retained the habit of imagining graduate students as charges in need of paternalistic care. While we do not seek a more callous professoriate, it seems this habit may have thwarted full cognizance of the division of labor responsible for producing and employing the vast majority of professors, graduate students, adjuncts, and administrators currently working in American higher ed.

It is not as if the faculty don't know their graduate students are employees. Rather, the problem is that they treat them as students first and employees second. What would happen if we reversed this, and treated them first and foremost as (fellow) employees? Bousquet argues that neoliberal administrative rhetoric considers graduate students rational actors while neoliberal administrative behavior reduces them to waste. To address this, he contends that graduate students should shake off their false consciousness and organize. A similar appeal rings through recent writing about adjunct labor and, as [Sue Doe and Mike Palmquist observe in the *ADE Bulletin*](#), academic professional organizations are increasingly endorsing this approach. These efforts represent a turn towards incorporating graduates in the humanities as part of a workforce, and as such are well worth supporting. Still, it remains striking how much they lag behind the 1960s emergence of the problem they seek to address. As Dubin and Beisse point out, the graduate students began organizing when universities used their labor to supplement the professoriate, while disavowing this new division of professional labor. The narratives currently revising our understanding of the university's recent past should take care not to repeat that disavowal.