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[How the University Works](#)

January 28, 2008 @ 3:09 pm · Filed under [teaching](#), [the profession](#)

In his theoretically sophisticated and thoroughly researched analysis of academic labor, [How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation](#), Marc Bousquet offers a sharp critique what might be called the “corporate university,” illustrating the ways in which universities have come to depend upon the very labor “crises” they claim to denounce. In fact, as Bousquet explains at length, the increasing reliance upon adjunct and flexible labor is not a crisis at all but fully consistent with the university’s desire for a flexible and cheap labor pool, while for-profit educational services have seen their profits skyrocket. In describing the increasingly corporatized management of university labor, Bousquet compares this management structure to the practices associated with managed health care. As we have seen with Michael Moore’s agitprop critique of HMOs in [Sicko](#), this emphasis on profit over care inevitably leads to what Bousquet describes as “degraded service” (1). But while Bousquet is attentive to the degree to which the use of contingent, flexible labor has become a means of subsidizing “education profiteers,” I was equally intrigued by his discussion of how work permeates every aspect of university life, a point [Miriam](#) raises in her discussion of “the need to conceptualize academic workers *as* workers, and not as disembodied minds engaging in some activity that has nothing to do with other forms of labor.”

Like Miriam, I generally find this claim convincing, especially when it comes to describing the experiences of both undergraduates and graduate students. As many people have pointed out, including Cary Nelson, in his provocative Foreword, one of the most jarring moments in Bousquet’s book is his account of “Metropolitan College,” a joint partnership between UPS and the University of Louisville, that uses student labor to sort packages late at night (usually from midnight until 3 AM), with the promise of tuition breaks, especially for students willing to work five nights a week. Eventually, we realize that while this partnership clearly provides a docile, cheap labor pool for UPS—not to mention the tax breaks that come with providing tuition benefits instead of actual wages—the deal isn’t so good for the students who engage in the backbreaking and under-compensated labor for the promise of upper mobility seemingly offered by a college education (note: sections of this chapter are [available here](#)). In fact, given the low wages and inconsistent hours, many of the students employed by UPS are forced to take second jobs or live in their cars, while a majority of the UPS students drop out of school altogether. Thus, instead of serving as a means for supporting students in acquiring a college degree, the UPS partnership actually benefits from students failing to achieve their degree (144). While the Metropolitan College example may represent an extreme of sorts, it’s clear that students are facing increasing financial obstacles in their pursuit of a college degree, whether that entails [working long hours in addition to schoolwork](#) or taking on sizable student loans. But in addition to this recognition that students are workers, Bousquet is at his sharpest in identifying the “pedagogical” implications of this experience of the university. Taking his cue from Jeffrey Williams’ concept of the “[pedagogy of debt](#)” (153), Bousquet points out that the Louisville students learn to see themselves via the lens of “failure,” or believe that they “deserve their fate” when their work lives overwhelm their lives as students (147). By placing students in the position of indebtedness, by putting an increasing financial

burden on them, the corporatized university is also teaching them about the limits and possibilities available to them in the future (in fact, I can speak from my own experiences in saying that student loan debt certainly has shaped the career choices I've made).

Miriam may be right that this labor model of academic work falters slightly when it comes to graduate student and faculty labor, where many of us work in the academia out of a genuine love of teaching, reading novels, or watching movies, or whatever. However, I continue to find my enjoyment of the subject matter I teach and research to be balanced by the tasks of grading and committee work that seem to take up more of my time every semester. Miriam's main point here, however, seems to be that this "love" for teaching can place both internal and external pressures on the individual job candidate to take the flexible, underpaid positions associated with adjuncting, but even with that affective relationship to teaching, a recognition that academic labor *is* labor still seems crucial to me.

At the same time, the emphasis on affect obscures the point that when it comes to graduate student labor, "the academic labor system increasingly prefers teachers without the Ph.D." (205), making the degree itself the "waste" that the system discards once the labor provided by the graduate employee is no longer useful (27) [*see Miriam on this point as well*]. These metaphors of waste kept coming back throughout Bousquet's book—the burned out Metropolitan College "students," the used-up graduate employee—oddly reminding me of Eric Schlosser's scathing indictment of the wastes associated with the fast food industry in *Fast Food Nation*. And even if there isn't "shit in the meat" as Greg Kinnear's character learns in the film adaptation of Schlosser's book, casualization produces its own form of waste: "nearly all of the administrative responses to the degree holder can already be understood as responses to waste: flush it, ship it to the provinces, recycle it through another industry, keep it away from the fresh meat" (26). This treatment of graduate labor is only reinforced by the observation that "if degree holders were doing the teaching, there would be too few of them" (41).

It's worth emphasizing, as well, especially for those who don't work in academia, the conditions in which many contingent faculty, or "disposable workers," to keep the waste metaphor in operation, labor: many universities pay approximately \$2,000-\$2,500 a course without benefits. At four courses a semester, that's about \$16,000 per year. Add to that a crippling student loan debt, the demands that adjunct faculty provide many of their own supplies, and the commonplace situation where adjunct faculty teach on two, and sometimes, three campuses—often using their car as a virtual office—and you get a clear sense of these irresponsible hiring practices and begin to understand how adjunct faculty often depend upon partners with a more stable career, or in some cases, even find themselves living on food stamps. It's also worth emphasizing that many adjuncts are quite capable, excellent teachers and scholars, who find themselves facing these difficult working conditions. To use Bousquet's fast-food inspired metaphor: even the best chef would be "pressed in the service of the Quarter Pounder" in the kitchen of a McDonalds (6).

While Bousquet is attentive to these problems with the corporatized university, he is also aware of the kinds of actions required to change these conditions. And the discussions of labor law, the composition of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), are helpful here as are the accounts of graduate student, contingent faculty, and tenure-stream unionization movements (as this [Inside Higher Ed article](#) observes, the MLA and other organizations have been forced, in recent years, to pay more attention to the issues of contingent labor because of activism by grad employees and adjuncts). But one of the questions that could have been addressed further was the possibilities available to faculty members and graduate employees in right-to-work states, such as my current employer, the state of North Carolina. While I have become somewhat more committed to becoming involved in the AAUP, I feel as if I might have benefited from a more specific account of how faculty and

graduate employees in strongly anti-union states could protect themselves. That being said, like Miriam, I also found Cary Nelson's calls for a "salary cap" on faculty and administrator salaries to be unconvincing, especially given that few faculty members make the salaries that Nelson cites, especially outside of Research I universities (coaches' salaries might be another matter).

Emphasizing the need for collective action, or unionization, Bousquet argues, quite cogently using the example of Annette Kolodny's description of her experiences as a dean in *Failing the Future*, to illustrate the ways in which "having administrative power is to be subject to administrative imperatives" (174). In this context, Bousquet is especially critical of the professionalization models associated with the field of rhetoric and composition, criticizing what he calls the "managerial subjectivity" that informs much—though by no means all—of the scholarship in that field. I'm not doing Bousquet's analysis of rhetoric and composition justice here because he is attentive to the ways in which composition scholars are attentive to these issues, but his discussion of this "managerial sensibility" is noteworthy none the less.

Finally, I think it's worth noting that in a book describing "how the university works," Bousquet spends little time addressing what it is professors actually do in the classroom or in their offices. In fact, the most detailed descriptions of labor include the student UPS workers, the adjuncts navigating a full slate of classes. This is likely by design. What seems more crucial here are the other pedagogies that have come to shape university life—the pedagogy of debt that shapes student and faculty horizons and the pedagogy of contingency that constrains the possibilities of true academic freedom.

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1. [The Chutry Experiment » Twilight of Academic Freedom](#) Said,

February 10, 2008 @ [12:18 pm](#)

[...] archives this morning, I happened to notice that Marc Bousquet, author of *How the University Works* (my review), has posted another video interview, this time with Cary Nelson, the president of the American [...]

2. [The Chutry Experiment » Academic Labor Links](#) Said,

May 2, 2008 @ [3:03 pm](#)

[...] As always Marc Bousquet's blog is a great resource for a number of these issues (here's my review of his book, *How the University* [...])

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The Chutry Experiment is written by Chuck Tryon, an assistant professor of film and media studies at Fayetteville State University. You can email me at [chutry\[at\]msn\[dot\]com](mailto:chutry[at]msn[dot]com).

My book, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence*, was released in 2009 by [Rutgers University Press](#).

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