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How Should the University Work?

How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation.
Marc Bousquet. New York: New York University Press, 2008.

Reviewed by Claire A. Kirchhoff

It is not always comfortable to read Marc Bousquet's *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*, nor should it be. Bousquet describes a dilemma that should be familiar to members of the AAUP: most teaching at the undergraduate level is done by people off the tenure track. This is a problem for several reasons related to academic freedom, fair compensation, and scholarship.

Bousquet also points out that rising university tuition is intricately linked with continually declining wages and benefits for those who teach (I use the word "university" in this review—as Bousquet does in the title of his book—to refer to all types of higher education institutions). At the same time, the number of administrators has continued to rise, as have their salaries. These trends have an alarming correspondence to the number of non-tenure-track workers in higher education. Even more alarming is the history Bousquet relates of how administrations have actively (and successfully) sought to change campus culture so that it is easier to manage and control the campus workforce.

Although these developments are disturbing, Bousquet's explanation of how this smoothly operating system of tenure repression has come about is what really makes one squirm while reading this book. It should. *We* are the ones who, through our complacency, have allowed an exploitative, corporate model to dominate our universities.

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We cannot lay the blame for poor compensation for non-tenure-track faculty and the decline in the number of tenure-track jobs solely on administrators. Bousquet demonstrates how faculty have been largely complacent about administrative decisions and accepted corporate culture at their institutions. Faculty unions have been well placed to resist the increased use of contingent labor but usually have not done so.

He also emphasizes that the system currently in place—one that exploits workers whose academic careers often end with attaining the PhD—is not flawed. The system runs just as it should to maintain a large, underpaid, and flexible workforce able to fill open positions “just in time.” Note, for example, that graduate admissions are not expanded and contracted based on the availability of tenure-track faculty jobs but rather on immediate undergraduate teaching needs.

Bousquet points out that we are not “overproducing” PhDs, as some observers of higher education have argued. A paucity of jobs for those holding the PhD is caused by the fact that so much teaching and other academic work is being done by underpaid graduate students and adjuncts. He also rightly states that “cheap teaching is not a victimless crime.” Underpaying those who teach, whether graduate students or adjuncts, helps keep wages for the tenured low. In addition, because of graduate student turnover, more experienced teachers are often replaced by less experienced teachers (some having undergone a magical transformation—called “the summer”—between earning a bachelor’s degree and starting to teach undergraduates).

Hiring large numbers of underpaid teachers also limits academic freedom by decreasing the proportion of tenured faculty, thus reducing the ability of the non-tenure-track to teach controversial topics or simply difficult classes. Shared governance suffers with fewer tenured and tenure-track faculty available to serve. And less scholarship is produced when the non-tenure-track undertake massive teaching workloads to compensate for low pay.

One myth about adjuncts that Bousquet does not address explicitly in his book is that most are off the tenure track by choice. Some adjuncts are professionals in fields outside higher education and are called on to teach special courses (for minimal pay); others are retired or semiretired faculty who pick up an occasional class for the sheer joy of teaching. Most adjuncts, however, are qualified degree holders who want full-time academic jobs (with full-time pay and benefits). Bousquet does explain that lack of

tenure is a race, class, and gender issue as well as a workplace issue. Women, minorities, and those from lower-income backgrounds are far more likely to be non-tenure-track and underpaid than their similarly qualified white male counterparts of middle- and upper-class backgrounds.

Bousquet presents a hopeful solution to the problems he describes. In principle it is simple, though the effort required is great: organize! An activist culture is needed to raise awareness not only of higher education's predicament, but also of the power we as workers in higher education have. We must organize and show real solidarity across tiers. We must organize not just with tenured faculty, but with other teachers: graduate students and contingent faculty. We must organize not just with other teachers, but with other workers at our universities: clerical, technical, and janitorial workers and anyone else whose labor makes a university run. Whether or not organizing involves collective bargaining is less important than showing real solidarity for one another in support of fairer compensation and better working conditions.

This solidarity is necessary because administrations are well organized and continually seeking to improve "efficiency" or to get more labor for less cost. Administrations prefer not only cheap labor but labor that is easier to control (that is, unorganized). Bousquet is correct in pointing out that real power resides in our organization and solidarity. Administrations fear it, which is why they fight so hard to prevent the formation of collective bargaining units. Administrations try to prevent worker organization by categorizing students as "nonworkers" and faculty as "management." The following figures, cited by Bousquet, demonstrate this fear of our power: the graduate employee union at the University of Michigan sought "contract improvements" amounting to approximately \$700,000 a year. Annual salaries of the university's bargaining team (seeking to limit contract improvements) added up to nearly that: \$630,000.

Because we know we can expect continual and persistent efforts to undermine our solidarity and organizing, we must engage in political campaigns to get legislators and the public on the side of organizing workers in higher education. We must raise awareness of the issues confronting higher education and about exactly who benefits from the current system (hint: it is not students, taxpayers, tuition payers, teachers, or most other employees). Sometimes, we will have to "creatively disrupt university business as usual," as Bousquet writes.

Bousquet has described how the university works. I found his account alarmingly accurate and have taken Bousquet's work as a call to arms. If you don't like the way the university works, what will you do to change it?

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