

Higher Education's Hidden Economy: An Indispensable Critique of the Knowledge Industry

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How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation. By Marc Bousquet, with a foreword by Cary Nelson. New York: NYU Press, 2008, 304 pp., \$23.00 (PB), ISBN: 978-0-814-79975-8.

As the California Faculty Association (<http://calfac.org/index.html>) points out, “Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions.” Now Marc Bousquet has gone one better, explaining in excruciating and illuminating detail how institutions of higher education increasingly exploit not just faculty, but also students, and not only graduate teaching assistants, but undergraduates, as well—while serving the processes of teaching and learning less and less effectively. In her foreword, Cary Nelson, current president of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), identifies Bousquet’s new book as “the single most important recent advance in our understanding of the structure of higher education” (p. xiii). For college and university teachers who are concerned that the meaning of what we do is conditioned in part by the context in which we do it, *How the University Works* is an indispensable resource.

The corporatization of higher education degrades the educational experience in several ways. The commercialization of research into “intellectual property” raises concerns about the intellectual independence of faculty funded by private enterprise and also about the concentration of funding into support for readily profitable products. The commodification of instructional materials into prepackaged courseware, notes, and video lectures construes learning as an empty exercise in the memorization of dead facts, rather than live engagement with unsettled questions and the creation of new knowledge. It also works hand-in-glove with the so-called “casualization” of instruction: the rapid increase in adjunct, term-contract, and graduate-student teaching—and the precipitous drop in tenure-stream positions.

As founding editor of *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* and author of *The Politics of Information* (2004) and *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers* (2003), Bousquet is well positioned to address these issues. He has published widely on the structure of work within higher education and also has long experience on the front lines of academic labor organizing. An activist in the Graduate Student Caucus in the 1990s, he now serves on the AAUP’s National

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Council. In *How the University Works*, Bousquet brings together the lessons of practical experience and the insights of scholarly reflection. In six chapters of highly accessible and frequently gripping analysis, he outlines an understanding of the economics of higher education with serious consequences for the practices of teaching and learning. Helpfully, the two chapters most readily adaptable to the undergraduate classroom are available online, along with other print and video resources, via Bousquet's informative website: www.marcbousquet.net.

The book's substantial introduction treats an array of interrelated topics over the course of 50-plus pages. Although Bousquet draws here from several separate pieces previously published, the full significance of his analysis is evident only in the context of their interconnection. Here "the social engineering of faculty culture" (p. 13) is revealed to be the intentional effect of specific management strategies; the kind of job-market analyses touted by professional organizations such as the Modern Language Association are shown to perpetuate the worst kind of sham; the legal history of the National Labor Relations Board is discussed in detail—and all are rigorously examined for their specific connections to the exploitation of students and teachers at every level of higher learning. Although challenging in its reach and range, this chapter is critically important and not difficult to read. It concludes with a discussion of graduate-student and contingent-instructor organizing that is somewhat encouraging. If necessary, this chapter could stand alone as an introduction to Bousquet's ideas in a classroom or seminar setting.

Subsequent chapters are more focused, often elaborating some particular strain of the introduction. Chapter Two treats the "informal economy" of what Bousquet calls the "Information University," while Chapter Three pursues his illuminating investigation of management theory. Chapter Four will be of par-

ticular interest to undergraduates and those who teach them, as it offers an important and original analysis of the surprising extent to which even undergraduate students function as flexible labor from which higher educational institutions and private enterprise draw profit, often in partnership. Here Bousquet details the shocking story of an arrangement between Louisville-area institutions and UPS advertised as "Metropolitan College," which is not a college at all, but essentially "little more than a labor contractor" (127). Students are enticed into signing agreements to serve as cheap "part-time" labor, in the middle of the night, in exchange for educational benefits most do not last long enough to see. Many are injured on the job, performing heavy lifting under difficult conditions. Although the Louisville example is especially egregious, Bousquet argues that undergraduate labor is systematically exploited nationwide, as "UPS is just one of thousands of employers large and small whose business plans revolve centrally around the availability of a workforce who primarily consider themselves something other than workers." The list includes colleges and universities themselves, who engage in "internal outsourcing" through work-study arrangements and other on-campus employment, even using undergraduates as teaching assistants in some cases (146-147). Students accept work that is "part-time" (even if performed more than 40 hours per week), non-permanent, and under-compensated in hopes that education will enable them to escape, eventually. Arguably, this arrangement contributes to an ideological association of service and manual labor with immaturity, underdevelopment, and low status; Bousquet suggests that the conception of such work as unfit for full citizens extends to a disrespect for adults who rely on such jobs for their livelihood. Undeniably, the exploitation of student labor has the material effect of driving down wages and quite literally "devaluing" this work. Chapter Five discusses the administration of composition courses, and Chapter Six eviscerates the

market logic that obscures the actual operations of academic labor. Two helpful appendices provide the crucial Supreme Court decisions on faculty and graduate-student organizing at private institutions.

Bousquet is at his best in condensing complex operations of economic and institutional forces to their clarifying core effects, often employing the arresting metaphors of management theory itself. Thus, as he outlines in the introduction and elaborates in Chapter Six, completed Ph.D.s are best understood not as the desired *product* of graduate education, but as an unwanted *by-product*, or industrial “waste.” His argument that graduate-student instructors are most valuable to the system as underpaid “apprentices,” whose meager wages are generally supplemented by loans or other external sources of support (spouses, parents) and whose exploitation is excused on the grounds that it is temporary and buffered by extra-economic benefit (enlightenment, professional mentoring), is rigorous and compelling. With degree in hand, expectations raised, families’ patience wearing thin, and loans coming due, new Ph.D.s more often than not face a future of contingent or even part-time employment—or a career change. Their value to a system based on extracting significant surplus value from an instructional force of students drops like a rock the moment they receive the diploma. Recent reports on the structure of academic employment from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the MLA make clear the accuracy and the urgency of Bousquet’s analysis, confirming that more teaching than ever before is now performed by non-degreed graduate students and contingent faculty, adjuncts, and term-contract employees.¹

Bousquet’s precise formulation should serve as a wake-up call not only to prospective Ph.D.s, but to the faculty who work with them. If graduate students’ function in the system is to serve as exploited labor rather than prospective tenure-stream faculty, what does that say about the graduate faculty who instruct them in

seminars, serve on their committees, and direct their dissertations? Although Bousquet does not pursue this point, I can only conclude that our role in this system is to attract and distract the grad-student instructors who make this system run. If we reach a point when the cost of tenured faculty is not underwritten by the surplus derived from grad-student labor by a margin more profitable than the shift to adjunct and other contingent labor would provide, we will have reached the point of no return (and no more tenure). Bousquet can be relied upon to put one’s academic pretensions in perspective.

Finally, faculty would do well to attend to Bousquet’s argument that shared governance is, in essence, a sham. His thorough review of the literature in management theory and higher-ed administration reveals a significant strain of thought in which faculty committees and senates are consciously constructed as “energy sinks” and “garbage cans” (72-74) designed to draw faculty initiative away from any arena where it might actually have an impact (collective bargaining, for example). For some, this revelation may bring relief, confirming the essential truth of long and frustrating experience. For others, one hopes, it may prove clarifying. Interestingly, given Bousquet’s long involvement in labor organizing, the unionization of tenure-stream faculty gets short shrift in this book, and perhaps rightly so. Bousquet observes that, like other organized workers—including the full-timers at UPS—unionized faculty have frequently sold out our colleagues, passively accepting the evolution of a two- (or more) tiered workplace and at times actively assisting in its production. He calls instead for a “dictatorship of the flexible” (45). Observing a potential already evident in the organization of graduate students and contingent instructors, he advocates “acknowledging the intellectual and political leadership of the union movements of the casualized” (46).

I would have liked Bousquet to say more about the potential for tenured faculty to accept more responsibility for creating the conditions for secure, fairly compensated employment and academic integrity throughout the institution. I like to think we can do better and hope this book might shame tenured faculty into stepping up. I am also convinced that the costs to academic freedom exacted by so many of the practices that Bousquet describes are unsustainable. Clearly, this is a topic that merits much closer attention. None of this, however, should be construed as real criticism. The bottom line is that Marc Bousquet has performed a vital public service in writing this compelling and critically important book. *How the University Works* should be required reading for everyone affiliated with higher education—not least, prospective Ph.D.s and the faculty who teach and mentor them. ■■

Notes

1 American Federation of Teachers, Higher Education Division. American academic: The state of the higher education work force 1997-2007. AFT, 2009. Available at http://www.aftface.org/storage/face/documents/ameracad_report_97-07for_web.pdf.

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