

An Unstable Bridge: A REEES Graduate Student Perspective on Contemporary Academia

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One of the initial efforts of the Working Group for Solidarity in REEES (WGS) was gathering information about the needs of graduate students across the field in light of the ongoing pandemic. What emerged from the survey quickly outgrew the bounds of immediate, COVID-related issues. It became clear that, for REEES graduate students, our discipline needs to have an open conversation about the structural tendencies toward austerity, casualization, and precarity that characterize the profession we are entering. As part of this WGS cluster, our hope in this piece is to begin this conversation. We conducted formal interviews with nineteen PhD students and recently graduated PhDs from both public and private institutions on the coasts and in the Midwest. The participants are both American citizens and international students, working in various areas of specialization from literature and linguistics to history and social sciences and at all stages of their programs. Through these interviews emerged several common concerns related to the graduate experience, the job market, and larger structural tendencies in the field. Though we lack the robust quantitative data of a fully-fledged study, our research provides qualitative insights into the current status of graduate education in REEES from the perspective of graduate students. These conversations also brought to the fore tangible solutions, which jibe with the recent scholarly literature on academic labor.

In order to understand the specificity of REEES fields, we need to understand the larger economic structures within which our discipline is located. The contemporary American university's reliance on an increasingly immiserated, debt-ridden, and precarious workforce amounts to a sea change in the character of academic labor. This change has developed in tandem with large-scale socio-economic transformations that scholars like David Harvey date back to at least the 1970s, signaling the end of the postwar economic boom period.¹ Higher education in the US reflects tendential and accelerating expansion of so-called "gig work," by which businesses rely on a de-professionalized and contingently employed workforce.² This manifests in part as

1. The most cited and accessible primer is: David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, 2011). For the earliest full-length studies of neoliberalism and academia, see Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University* (Baltimore, 1997), and Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education* (Baltimore, 2004). Recently, see Adrianna Kezar, Tom DePaola, and Daniel T. Scott, *The Gig Academy: Mapping Labor in the Neoliberal University* (Baltimore, 2019).

2. According to economists Lawrence Katz and Alan B. Krueger, the contingent workforce has nationally grown by around 50% in the last two decades: "The Rise and Nature of Alternative Work Arrangements in the United States, 1995–2015," *ILR Review*

a systematic expansion of the number of PhDs produced, coupled with an equally systematic contraction in the number of stable academic positions. This yields “a system in which low wages and precariousness are standard terms of employment for the least and most educated workers alike.”³ The situation, then, is not one in which the neutral space of the market is flooded by an “overproduction” of PhDs. Rather, higher education has been actively transformed in line with the neoliberal imperatives of the larger economy.⁴

One of the most salient effects of this restructuring is a persistent downward pressure on wages and benefits for most of non-managerial academic labor paired with a secular increase in job seekers relative to open positions. These dual pressures have created a workforce that is more willing to accept poorly paid, contingent work while capitalizing on career aspirations, making a virtue of flexibility and extremely heavy workloads. As many scholars have noted, the move away from a “welfare state” model of higher education has yielded universities that function like corporations in terms of both financial structure and marketing to consumers.⁵ Though we should resist any idyllic picture of a postwar “Golden Age,” noting these changes helps us to understand the economic basis of the situation in which the contemporary university finds itself and reminds us that these changes are historical and, therefore, changeable.

REEES fields occupy a place in the larger structures of the neoliberal academy similar to that of other small fields in the humanities and social sciences. Over the course of the pandemic, Slavic programs have been closed and others have been reduced in their faculty or consolidated into other departments. We have seen university administrations cite the COVID-19 crisis in justifying their decisions to axe humanities programs, departments, and stable positions, which they have long wanted to see on the chopping block in the service of fields that ostensibly bring in more revenue. Though many of these issues have undergone accelerated development over the past year in academia in general, and in REEES fields in particular, the secondary literature demonstrates that austerity justified by the COVID-19 pandemic is merely an intensification of a decades-long trend. As such, the particular experience of REEES

72, no. 2 (March 2019): 382–416, at doi.org/10.3386/w22667 (accessed November 5, 2021). See Kezar, DePaola, and Scott for an account of the particular mechanisms of de-professionalization and contingency in academia in *The Gig Academy*, chapter, 2–3; see also Gary Hall, *The Uberfication of the University* (Minneapolis, 2016).

3. Kezar, DePaola, and Scott, 19.

4. Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York, 2008), 21. By casualization we mean the process by which jobs, in this case academic positions, become less likely to be regular or permanent. On this, see Ishmael I. Munene, *Contextualizing and Organizing Contingent Faculty: Reclaiming Academic Labor in Universities* (Lanham, Maryland, 2018), 3–60.

5. A.J. Angulo, “From Golden Era to Gig Economy: Changing Contexts for Academic Labor in America,” in Kim Tolley ed., *Professors in the Gig Economy* (Baltimore, 2018), 3–26; Jeffrey Williams, “The Post-Welfare State University,” *American Literary History* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 190–216. Melinda Cooper, “*In Loco Parentis*: Human Capital, Student Debt, and the Logic of Family Investment,” in her *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York, 2017). For a similar set of arguments that are global in scope, see Suman Gupta, Jernej Habjan, and Hrvoje Tutek, eds., *Academic Labour, Unemployment and Global Higher Education: Neoliberal Policies of Funding and Management* (London, 2016).

graduate students, to which we turn below, ought to be understood in the context of a radically restructured academic workplace.⁶

At a moment in which, according to the Economic Policy Institute, close to 75% of contemporary academic labor is carried out by graduate workers and non-tenure track faculty, the work that graduate workers do as teaching and research assistants both resembles and plays a similar structural role to that of their adjunct and non-tenure track colleagues.⁷ Meanwhile, graduate students are still educated according to an older, apprenticeship-based model linked to a time when a PhD bridged to secure employment inside and outside academia. As both students and workers, graduate students occupy a unique position within the larger university system, and it is often a failure or unwillingness to disambiguate this dual role that makes graduate student organizing a contentious affair, as attested in both the scholarly literature and our interviews. In fact, administrations routinely leverage the *student* aspect of this position in attempts to deny graduate workers the right to collectively bargain.⁸ Graduate workers who wish to guarantee basic workplace protections, to secure democratic control over their working conditions, or to make gains in terms of salary and benefits find themselves up against the full array of the university's institutional resources. These include well-funded anti-union campaigns, teams of union-busting lawyers, and, in some cases, the use of police violence on the picket line.⁹ Universities unquestionably depend on graduate and non-tenure track labor in order to function, and yet, as our interviewees observed, graduate students typically face strong resistance by their respective universities and sometimes in their own departments before getting formal recognition *as workers*.

Throughout our interviews there appeared several recurring themes, however, the one that rang through with particular clarity was precarity. There are

6. See Kezar, DePaola, and Scott: "By restricting secure and well-paid positions to upper management and a smattering of faculty, while at the same time engineering a surplus of PhDs many times what the job market can absorb, institutions capitalize on the depressed value of labor which they have collectively brought about through systemic overproduction" (26).

7. Teresa Kroeger, Celine McNicholas, Marni von Wilpert, and Julia Wolfe, "The State of Graduate Student Employee Unions: Momentum to Organize Among Graduate Student Workers Is Growing Despite Opposition," *Economic Policy Institute*, January 11, 20 www.epi.org/publication/graduate-student-employee-unions/ (accessed June 28, 2021).

8. For example, after the 2016 NLRB decision affirming the right of graduate workers at private institutions to collectively bargain, Columbia University was joined by Brown, Cornell, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, Yale, MIT, and The National Right to Work Legal Defense and Education Foundation (a conservative non-profit) in an amicus brief that argued—against existing empirical data and in spite of the successful existence of graduate unions at public institutions for more than five decades—that unionization would "harm the 'educational process.'" *Columbia Univ.*, 364 NLRB No. 90, Slip. Op. at *1 n.3 & 9 (Aug. 23, 2016) cited in Kroeger, McNicholas, Wilpert, and Wolfe.

9. One recent, particularly stark case of institutional resistance to graduate worker demands comes from the University of California (UC)-wide campaign for a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA), which saw the UC's deployment of riot police at the picket line, resulting in episodes of violence. See L. Summers and K. Gougelet, "Whose University? When Police Pass the Baton to Campuses," *Society for the Anthropology of Work*, December 1, 2020: saw.americananthro.org/pub/whose-university-when-police-pass-the-baton-to-campuses/release/1 (accessed February 13, 2021).

a number of valences to this term, which refers to a lack of employment and to material or psychological security. Many of our respondents report feeling satisfied with the intellectual atmospheres of their departments. They express, nevertheless, low levels of satisfaction when it comes to questions of material and personal well-being. Anxiety and hopelessness regarding job prospects after graduation are, sadly, unsurprising in this context. Furthermore, in our research we found that precarity begins far earlier in the graduate career.

Most graduate students, particularly those located in places like New York City, the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, Chicago, and the Boston area, fall under what the US Department of Housing and Urban Development defines as “rent burdened” or “severely rent burdened.”¹⁰ Graduate students who cannot count on family support often find themselves moving through a string of temporary living situations or staying in unsuitable personal relationships in order to maintain housing. One west-coast graduate student attests to experiencing houselessness for the first several months of their program because their graduate stipend was insufficient to cover rent and moving expenses. The only student housing available to another west-coast interviewee was priced at a for-profit market rate and available only at the end of a long waiting list.¹¹ “Every summer was a crisis” commented an international interviewee regarding the inconsistent summer funding from their institution.¹² In fact, American and international students are, for opposite reasons, often forced to spend summers abroad by piecing together what fellowships they can. This uncertainty, combined with the added difficulty in obtaining visas due to the current geopolitical tensions, makes sustained research difficult and a stable personal life impossible. For international students, who are disproportionately represented in REEES fields and whose options to remain in the US while working legally outside of academia are extremely limited, the situation during the summers can be especially challenging, resulting in the accumulation of debt and the necessity to work multiple part-time jobs on campus while juggling research and personal life.¹³ The situation is so dire that a recently graduated PhD from the Midwest noted: “There were months when we wouldn’t even have enough for food. . . and it really influences the

10. Tenants are “Rent Burdened” if they spend more than 30% of their income on rent, and “Severely Rent Burdened” if they spend more than 50%. See Frederick J. Eggers and Fouad Mouden, “Investigating Very High Rent Burdens Among Renters in the American Housing Survey” (US Department of Housing and Urban Development): www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/ahs/2010_high_rent_burdens_v2.pdf (accessed February 8, 2021).

11. Universities serving as for-profit landlords under the guise of providing student housing is a trend observable across American academia. A cursory survey of publicly available cost of attendance data gleaned from their respective websites confirms that at Harvard, Columbia, UC-Berkeley, UC-Santa Barbara, Wisconsin-Madison, NYU, Princeton, Stanford, UChicago, USC, Michigan-Ann Arbor, and Oregon none of the non-loan types of funding offered are enough to take grad students out of rent burden at these institutions, even when the university provides housing.

12. Recent graduate, interview, Berkeley, CA, January 29, 2021.

13. It is worth noting that, for PhD programs in REEES, international rather than domestic graduate students often make up the majority in their departments, with few exceptions like UC-Berkeley.

quality of your teaching and research, because then you can't focus."¹⁴ The result of keeping graduate students on poverty wages is that our discipline strongly favors those with intergenerational wealth and family support—a demographic which skews white, straight, cisgendered, and able-bodied. This is something our interviewees are acutely aware of, with one commenting that, for all of academia's stated commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion, "poverty wages for graduate workers means that our field deliberately excludes BIPOC and poor people."¹⁵

Prearity also produces a situation in which quiescence is the norm and an individualist, entrepreneurial understanding of academic work is reinforced—not least by the state of intense competition vis-à-vis other academics that stems from structural austerity. Because most graduate programs in REEES are small and close-knit, graduate students are often dependent on faculty in order to secure funding that is not guaranteed in their contracts. The apprenticeship model of graduate education—rooted in these personal, subjective relationships and hierarchical power dynamics—matches up poorly with many of the realities of graduate student life. From our interviews it became clear that many do not see a clear, safe, or effective way to address issues of sexual assault or harassment, gender discrimination, racism, classism, or plagiarism. Although each of these issues is different, the commonality seems to be a lack of adequate institutional structures at the department and university levels to address such concerns. Conditions vary by institution, but the results of our research show that many graduate students feel that expressing political disagreements with faculty, reporting discrimination that may or may not fall within a Title IX or Title VII complaint, or reporting plagiarism of unpublished work can easily lead to isolation in one's department and pose a danger to one's future employability. Many of our interviewees are also expected (or know of others who are expected) to perform extracontractual labor for faculty—named in our interviews were babysitting, offering relationship advice, catering, and even taking on additional uncompensated teaching loads in exchange for promises of future funding. Even in the case that this labor is paid, the respondents do not feel that they are in a position to refuse. Although all of the issues outlined here pertain to individual actions, we argue that it is precisely this combination of dependency and precarity, baked into the apprenticeship model functioning within the corporatized university, that allows such issues to be widespread features of graduate life.

None of this is to say that graduate workers are helpless in these institutional dynamics—they can and do organize to change them. We can trace a line from the struggles in the 1990s around graduate worker unionization punctuated by the Yale strike in 1996, to early-2000s student organization around debt and tuition hikes, to recent labor actions and unionization campaigns at places like the UC, NYU, Harvard, Columbia, Chicago, UIC, Wisconsin-Madison, Oregon, and Michigan in which some of our interviewees were involved. These organizing efforts often win concessions from the university, although they tend not to have the kind of broad-based support

14. Recent graduate student, Zoom interview, Los Angeles, CA, February 1, 2021.

15. Current graduate student, Zoom interview, Los Angeles, CA, February 9, 2021.

among faculty that our interviewees think they should. Though we learned of numerous instances of individual faculty members encouraging graduate student organizing, support is, typically, lukewarm at best. Many of our interviewees spoke of their efforts being met with silence, disinterest, and condescension. One graduate organizer observes that “the most senior faculty were generally dismissive if not outright antagonistic [toward our strike effort], including threats of strikebreaking.”¹⁶ In fact strikebreaking came up in several of our interviews: graduate organizers from both public and private institutions, who engaged in unionization campaigns or worked within established unions, spoke of faculty in their departments actively undermining their efforts. One interviewee recalled: “when we were organizing our strike, our department chair sat us down for a meeting and promised they would find lecturers or other graduate students to take over our classes—promising directly to undermine the strike.”¹⁷ This kind of response to graduate worker organizing may be a particularly pronounced issue in REEES fields owing in part to their Cold War constitution and the experiences of state socialism in eastern Europe. Several of our interviewees identified a tendency in their departments to equate organizing efforts with Soviet-style communism, which one graduate organizer termed “an ideological reflex of our field.”¹⁸ One of our Russian interviewees observed: “it was hard [initially] for me to see the meaning behind the socialist formulas [common to union campaigns] that [in Russia] were associated with the Soviet discourse. An idiosyncratic reaction to such rhetoric was almost inevitable, and it took me some time to understand its implications. It is, however, the faculty’s responsibility to listen to what we say about our conditions even if, ideologically or rhetorically, they’re repulsed.”¹⁹ Such instances create unnecessary conflicts between faculty and graduate students, whereas our interviewees expressed a desire for solidarity between the two groups.

We believe that the vast majority of faculty have the best interests of their graduate students at heart; the issue instead seems to be that graduate workers’ struggles for better conditions are not seen as inherently connected to structural tendencies toward austerity and casualization that affect the entire profession. These same structural tendencies have forced the closure or consolidation of smaller programs like those in REEES, made it difficult for departments to secure tenure lines, eroded faculty governance, and increasingly pose a threat to the institution of tenure itself. For example, in January 2021, the Kansas Board of Regents unanimously voted to simplify the process of firing tenured faculty, citing the COVID-19 crisis in connection with budget retrenchment. What we should recognize is that—when nearly three fourths of academic labor is carried out by graduate workers and contingent faculty—we all have a shared interest in fighting against austerity in all sectors of academia.²⁰ In order to adequately address the position of graduate

16. Current graduate student, Zoom interview, Berkeley, CA, January 24, 2021.

17. Current graduate student, Zoom interview, Berkeley, CA, January 20, 2021.

18. Current graduate student, Zoom interview, Berkeley, CA, January 25, 2021.

19. Current graduate student, email interview, June 9, 2021.

20. Kroeger, McNicholas, von Wilpert, and Wolfe, 4.

labor in contemporary academia and to envision what a livable profession could look like in the future, we need to establish solidarity among tenured and tenure-track faculty, contingent faculty and graduate workers.

Based on the data gathered through our research, we understand that the above-mentioned issues are structural and therefore exist beyond any individual, department, or institution. Individual efforts—many of which we learned about in our interviews—are essential, but we need to develop durable profession-wide structures to adequately address what is increasingly a profession in crisis. With these challenges in mind, we propose several strategies: two are immediate and practicable in the short term, and another one is broad-based and in need of time to develop.

First, we propose to establish open conversations about the current job market and to offer support to graduates at the end of their degree, as well as to those who choose non-academic career paths. Although similar conversations already take place during conferences, most of our interviewees are asking for a change in perspective. Rather than treating alt-ac career paths almost like a taboo, as several interviewees mentioned, we invite faculty to open up conversations on the reality of our field and to prepare those of us who ask for it for non-academic jobs. Other practices could entail setting new standards in hiring practices, such as instituting uniform deadlines for rejections in order to mitigate uncertainty, to shorten lengthy periods of anxiety, and to allow people, especially international students, to more adequately plan their futures. These would be concrete steps towards alleviating that sense of anxiety that students feel when entering the job market.

Second, we advocate for forming discipline-wide graduate student associations with branches in every Slavic department that can serve as a direct venue for communication between graduate students and faculty, which go beyond the individualized and informal ways of current communication. Such associations would create a space for graduate students to collectively formulate their needs and communicate them to faculty. If taken seriously, these could yield concrete changes that could address some issues of discrimination, informal labor, and communication at the department level.

Third, we encourage graduate students as well as tenure and non-tenure track faculty to form unions where they do not already exist, and build them into active, inclusive organizations where they do. Smaller fields, such as those in REEES, are often more precarious and can count on less administrative goodwill than larger programs in the humanities or the social sciences, making union protection especially important. The existing empirical data on unionization in academia suggests that strong unions actually mitigate most of the effects of structural austerity.²¹ Indeed, one PhD candidate observed that “joining our union is probably the best thing I have done in graduate school. We won raises for graduate workers, raised awareness around

21. Timothy Reese Cain, “Campus Unions: Organized Faculty and Graduate Students in U.S. Higher Education,” *ASHE Higher Education Report*, vol. 43, no. 3 (September 2017); Kezar and DePaola, “Understanding the Need for Unions: Contingent Faculty Working Conditions and the Relationship to Student Learning,” in Kim Tolley, ed., *Professors in the Gig Academy: Unionizing Adjunct Faculty in America* (Baltimore, 2018).

graduate worker exploitation and harassment, and worked on many department-specific issues. Joining my union also empowered me to talk about my own financial precarity with my department, as a way to put a face to these issues for them.”²² Unions in all areas of the profession should work together, exerting pressure from multiple angles in solidarity, in order to bring about structural transformation within academia. These changes should involve improving working conditions and increases to graduate student stipends in order to provide livable wages and summer support. Additionally, faculty unions, with the extra push from graduate student unions, could secure more permanent and tenure-track lines at the negotiating table with administrators and slow down the frightening movement to undermine tenure. While we are aware that this course of action will not yield results immediately, we argue that this cooperative organizing strategy is what is needed in the long term.

Considering our field in the broadest terms, then, we ask that tenure-line faculty understand that their position is bound up with that of their graduate students and non-tenure track colleagues. Graduate students would like to see faculty vocally and actively support their organizing efforts, as well as those of non-tenure track faculty, both inside and outside of union structures, and to recognize that it is in their own interest to do so. If we want to continue to have a profession to which we can be committed, if we want REEES to be something other than a source of cheap, overqualified labor within an increasingly austere university model, we need to build the leverage to create new possibilities within and across our institutions.

22. Current graduate student, email interview, February 6, 2021.