

Subterranean Fire: The Percolating Currents of Graduate Labor Activism in Rhetoric and Composition

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Introduction

Our field's history is instructive. The struggles from our disciplinary pasts continue today but too often occlude graduate workers. Drawing on moments of labor militancy in Rhetoric and Composition (Rhet-Comp) and our experiences as union organizers, we discuss what organizing as a practice can offer graduate labor in our discipline.

Disciplinary histories of Rhet-Comp are often intertwined with the history of shifting labor conditions in the university. Where one places the beginning of the field in the academy depends on who you ask (e.g., Bazerman, 2005; Brereton, 1995; Murphy, 2012), but wherever you choose to start, you will also find academics discussing their labor conditions. As the 1970s and 80s marshalled an increase in graduate programs in Rhet-Comp, so too did conversation about Rhet-Comp's place in the academy, especially as it relates to Literature. These discussions, perhaps best summarized in Maxine Hairston's (1985) emphatic CCCC's address, offer a painful picture of labor standards for writing instructors. These accounts focus on common demands also highlighted in the labor movement: working for dignity and respect on the job.

Such demands erupted in the mid-1980s with the passage of the Wyoming Resolution, which demanded better wages and working conditions along with a grievance procedure that could be brought against institutions that fail to live up to equitable labor standards (Robertson, Crowley, & Lentricchia, 1987). The Wyoming Resolution, kicked off by then graduate student Susan Wyche speaking out about her labor conditions, and collaboratively drafted by a diverse group of graduate students and faculty at the 1986 Wyoming Conference on English, has been described as a "story of cross-generational and cross-rank collaboration and the best kind of camaraderie and social action one could possibly imagine happening at a professional conference" (McDonald & Schell, 2011, p. 360). While the Wyoming Resolution did not achieve its most radical goals (Sledd, 1991), the subsequent CCCC Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing has become a flashpoint for reflection on organizing efforts and the work of composition instructors (McClure, Goldstein, & Pemberton, 2017), continuing recently with the Indianapolis Resolution (Cox, Dougherty, Kahn, LaFrance, & Lynch-Binieck, 2016) and the CCCC Labor Caucus.

Despite continued organizing across the field, issues of labor still abound, especially regarding the status of graduate students. The Writing Program Administrators Graduate Organization (WPA-GO)(2019) outlines the systemic overwork, lack of employment benefits, and lack of respect that graduate employees face in their work, concluding: “The takeaways from this report are relatively straightforward, and evident in the simple, surface-level percentages and figures: the labor conditions of GSIs are woefully inadequate” (p. 6). While organizations like WPA-GO are beginning to identify these labor concerns and new spaces for graduate students to organize are sprouting up (nextGEN), the field as a whole has still yet to address these problems. None of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Position Statements addresses graduate labor specifically. Of the statements that address “Professional Issues,” almost all of the statements focus on tenure and tenure-track professors. Only one statement addresses the professional lives of non-tenure track faculty, who are arguably the most precariously employed and least compensated people in the field after graduate instructors.¹

The failure to consider graduate labor and the professionalization of graduate students can also be seen through interactions with more senior colleagues in the field. WPA-GO (2019) begins with this powerful testimonial:

It seems a certain generation of WPAs does not respect reasonable labor practices. Our WPA expects writing program assistants to work “as many hours as needed to do the job” (her words) without recognizing what is indicated in our contract (that [sic] are to work no more than 20 hours/week). Her reasoning is that WPAs should expect to work additional hours and that experiencing this as grad students professionalizes us and will help us get jobs. These expectations and logics are and perpetuate abusive labor practices. (p. 1)

For many in our field and in the academy at large, overwork is synonymous with professionalization. This simply is not true. Working more does not teach you how to be a scholar or writing program administrator. Ignoring graduate student labor—or deprofessionalizing it as “mere” apprenticeship—further erases the material realities of graduate education (Wright, 2017). Attempting to uphold an apprenticeship model ignores the labor structure of the university.

We see our work in our graduate employee labor union, the Graduate Employees’ Organization (GEO) Local 6300, as valuable experience that refutes our position as apprentices and students only. Graduate students are workers. As union officers, we hired and evaluated staff, assessed the effectiveness of the union’s organizing efforts, helped administer a million-dollar budget, and

¹ Non-tenure-track faculty in Rhet-Comp have their own robust history of organizing (e.g., Kahn, Lalicker, & Lynch-Binieck, 2017), which we cannot adequately address in this piece. Their organizing is another current that graduate students can learn from.

mentored new members of the union. Through this work, we have learned much about how the university functions, and there is perhaps no better way to learn about the university and its operations than to sit across the table from its bargaining representatives as they propose a 0% raise, cuts to healthcare coverage, and the removal of tuition waivers. Our perception of union work as professionalization is not always shared by our more-senior colleagues. While many faculty at our institution have been supportive of our work with the GEO, they have expressed that this work is subordinate to our scholarship.

While the state of graduate labor in our field may be dire, we see addressing these concerns as commensurate with and a central part of our scholarship and professional identities. Graduate students like us have been fighting for the right to unionize across public (e.g., Committee on Rights and Compensation at CU-Boulder) and private (e.g., BU Grad Union at Boston University) campuses. The #RedForED movement, started in 2018, has seen mass labor actions taken by K-12 teachers across multiple states (Strauss, 2019; Reilly, 2019). Despite a recent rule change proposed by the National Labor Relations Board (2019), graduate workers are organizing in creative ways to fight for the dignity of our labor.

As the other essays in this volume show, graduate students are leading the charge to address and mitigate exploitation across multiple domains in our field. Kumari, Baniya, and Larson's (2020) work with nextGEN and the graduate student labor in WPA-GO illustrate how graduate students in the field can build spaces of community that resist racist rhetoric and faculty dismissal and foster supportive networks based in solidarity, or as Miller (2020) states, networks of care. In the section that follows, we'll discuss the role unions and organizing can play in securing the dignity and respect for our labor all the contributors to this volume advocate for.

Our Organizing Model and Collective Action

Like most of our new colleagues, both authors had little experience with labor activism before joining our union. Both of us signed our union cards when we arrived at orientation, but we did not get heavily involved with the union until the spring semester. The Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Coalition (NTFC, our sister union in the Illinois Federation of Teachers) was going on strike to secure their first contract, and they needed our help. NTFC wanted to shut down the English building where we both taught. To show support for our non-tenure-track colleagues, we joined them on the picket lines. The NTFC and our union, the GEO, continues to work together to ensure academic labor is respected on the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus. This initial experience was instructive and demonstrated to us the power of collective action.

Since then, our own union has won a two-week strike, even in the shadow of the Janus vs. AFSCME Supreme Court decision, which placed pressure on public-sector unions across the country. In that decision, the court held that "fair share"

fees, paid by non-union members to the union to compensate them for bargaining and enforcing a contract, were unconstitutional (Semuels, 2018). While this sudden cut to union budgets represents an existential threat to organized labor, many unions have responded by shifting their culture and renewing their focus on organizing.

Following in the footsteps of many other union locals, the GEO has begun to shift to an organizing model away from a service model. In an organizing model, instead of seeing the union as an external source of help with workplace issues, workers are encouraged to see themselves as active parts of both the union and its work. We see this organizing model, and the work of organizing more generally, as the first steps toward making the changes to our labor conditions that all workers deserve.

The organizing model “places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people, a mass of people never previously involved, who don’t consider themselves activists at all” and uses “specific injustice and outrage [as] the immediate motivation, but the primary goal is to transfer power from the elite to the majority” (McAlevey, 2016, p. 10). We wouldn’t have defined ourselves as activists when we began our organizing work. For Bruce, the specific injustice was the exploitation of international students in a Master’s of Computer Science program that was forcing students to pay to work at the university, despite having guaranteed tuition waivers (Kimutis & Kovanen, 2017). While those students were eventually made whole, we both continued to fight for tuition waiver protections in future contracts, leading to a two-week strike over the issue, among others. While the university tried to frame striking graduate students as disruptive and overcompensated, which further fueled organizing efforts (Gaines, 2018), graduate students themselves highlighted that their working conditions were their students’ learning conditions. Fighting to improve them wasn’t just a fight for higher wages or better workplace protections; it became a struggle for ensuring that education was accessible for all, not just the wealthy elite (Johnson, 2018).

While these examples from labor union work demonstrate the power of collective bargaining, the true power comes from *direct* collective action. Organized workers, regardless of union recognition or contract status, can make tangible improvements in their workplaces and communities. Workers, including graduate students on our own campus, have organized to improve their conditions without contractual protections; in 2004—before GEO gained union recognition—the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign provided graduate students with vision and dental insurance after a sustained drive for improved graduate student benefits. While less commonplace now, historically, workplaces operated without contracts as we understand them today and operated more informally, requiring organized workers to make sustainable change (Cartwright, 2018). Organizing both within and beyond a union context is necessary in order to make the changes we want to see in the field.

Take a Stand

While organizing is challenging, as Heller et al (2011) discuss in their forum in *College English*, it is a worthwhile endeavor. The organizing in Rhet-Comp to this point has focused on building the communities and solidarities necessary to address the field's systemic problems. Building on these existing calls for change, we need to come together to enforce them. Make no mistake: worker power is what gets things done, or, as Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) members say, "Direct action gets the goods." Organizing offers a path forward to address and mitigate exploitation across multiple domains (such as race, gender, class, ability). In our view, organizing is about making plans and working through them. This is informed by union literature such as Bradbury, Brenner, & Slaughter (2016), which lays out an approach to organizing. From one-on-one conversations between colleagues to organizing a labor action such as a rally or sit-in, organizing begins by identifying shared problems and then reframes those problems as places on which to take a stand (Parker & Gruelle, 2019). The Wyoming Resolution touched on a current of labor exploitation that has continued, in its varied strands, to our present moment. To enact organizing as a practice, we must build on the work of labor activists in the field and begin to address exploitation by organizing in our own departments, universities, and fields. Small actions, when done collectively, can have ripple effects across our field. Exchanges such as this symposium lay the groundwork for the sustained organizing that can change our field.

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