

Review

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Benjamin Johnson, Patrick Kavanagh, and Kevin Mattson, editors, *Steal This University: The Rise of the Corporate University and the Academic Labor Movement*. New York: Routledge, 2003. ISBN 0-415-93484-2 (pbk), \$18.95.



From an ad for the University of Phoenix

As with other aspects of life under neoliberal capitalism, the last several decades have seen the marketization of higher education. *Steal This University* considers the changes involved, their costs for both the academic labor force and the quality of the education process, and how academic workers have begun to fight back to defend and improve their work conditions and to develop a new democratic vision of education itself. Among the chapter authors are professional union organizers, faculty and graduate student unionists, independent contingent faculty militants, and left educational journalists.

The book is divided into three parts, each containing four or five chapters preceded by a useful introductory overview by the editors. Section One surveys the marketization of universities, emphasizing "the growing prominence of online education, the rise of for-profit universities like the University of Phoenix, the use of corporate management techniques such as merit pay, and the growing use of casual teaching labor" (p. 81). What emerges very clearly is the synergy between the use of information technology, the transformation of education into a standardized product, and the flexibilization and deprofessionalization of faculty labor.

Ana Marie Cox's chapter considers an extreme case of these trends, the University of Phoenix, while David Noble's chapter summarizes his well known critique of "digital diploma mills," i.e., the use of computers, websites and the internet to standardize courses and promote so-called distance education. Denise Tanguay then analyzes the growth of merit pay schemes and some of the tensions and struggles they have generated. Finally, Benjamin Johnson documents the growing share of courses and students taught by graduate assistants, adjuncts, and postdocs, showing how this share is often systematically underestimated. In fact, if graduate assistants are included, only about one-third of all instructors are now on tenure track in the United States, and the percent of student credit hours taught by tenure-track faculty may be even lower.

Overall, Section One demonstrates that the corporate-style "transformation of the academic workplace" has "produced a transformation of the academic worker whose rights and voice -- as both academic and employee -- were sacrificed in the name of profit, efficiency, and quality assurance" (p. 139). That it has done so in a way that undermines real efficiency and quality is clear from the continued bloating of university administrations, growth of average class sizes, the ongoing shift of university budgets from the education function to the research function (together with the conversion of research itself into vendible commodities), the increased waste of faculty time on merit pay and other evaluation procedures, and the growing pressure of committee work on the shrinking share of faculty who are tenure-track.

Section Two considers the effects of these structural changes and pressures more at the human level, in terms of the lived experiences of graduate students, adjuncts, and tenure-track faculty. Autobiographical chapters by Kevin Mattson and Alexis Moore open up the world of the overworked adjunct. We see how graduate school dreams of a life of scholarship and rich interaction with inquisitive students are displaced by the reality of juggling teaching schedules at several institutions, constantly writing and rewriting lectures, preparing and grading exams, and driving between several campuses (each offering little if anything by way of office facilities) in order to make a bare subsistence wage. Adding insult to injury are the ignorant and selfish attitudes not only of administrators but of many tenure-track professors toward contingent faculty, especially when the latter begin to make demands and/or attempt to organize. Even some faculty unions exhibit hostility toward contingent organizing efforts.

These attitudes, and their class basis in the faculty hierarchy, are on full display in Corey Robin's account of the conflict created between Yale graduate teaching assistants and their faculty advisors when the former undertook a grading strike in an attempt to force the administration to negotiate. Here, a number of "senior faculty," including some with impeccable left-wing credentials, "turned on their own students, writing negative letters of recommendation, blacklisting them, and supporting kangaroo court trials" (p. 82). A similar response, this time from administrators, was received by New York University Assistant Professor Joel Westheimer when he openly supported graduate student unionization at that institution. Westheimer's chapter documents how he "found previously supportive administrators suddenly cold and critical after he testified on behalf of the graduate students to the National Labor Relations Board" (p. 83). Fortunately, the decision to deny Westheimer tenure was later reversed just before a federal government lawsuit against NYU was to go to trial (see the report by Westheimer's law firm at www.eisnerassociates.com/westheimer/05.06.press.htm).

The book's third section turns to the strategies employed by graduate students and faculty to resist the commodification of university education and their academic labor. A wide range of questions and challenges are posed, from the choice of union affiliation, to

campaign tactics, to the relations among graduate students, contingent faculty, and tenure-track faculty, to the building of student and off-campus community support, to the use of computers and other media, and, finally, to the difficulties posed by semesterly turnover when organizing graduate students or non-tenure-track faculty.

Section Three begins with a contrast between the successful graduate student employee unionization campaign at NYU (Lisa Jessup) and the failed effort to organize graduate assistants at the University of Minnesota (Michael Brown, Ronda Copher, and Kate Gray Brown). The background here is the nationwide unionization struggle currently raging among graduate student employees. Already, "graduate students on more than twenty-six campuses have recognized unions and are organizing at fourteen other campuses" (p. 145). Indeed, graduate students "are more likely to be represented by unions than is the average American worker" (p. 145). In trying to learn from and advance this crucial front in the class war, the two case studies (written by direct participants) emphasize the importance of "situating the struggle . . . within a broader debate about the state of higher education and the rights of all workers to organize" (p. 141). The relevant stakeholders, both on and off campus, must "be given manageable and meaningful ways to express support and, more important, to pressure the . . . administration" (p. 141). In this connection, the Minnesota campaign may have suffered from an overemphasis on "the short-term achievements of signing cards and assessing support over the long-term goals of membership development and building" (pp. 141-142).

Section Three also covers various forms of struggle other than union certification battles. Cary Nelson's chapter considers the possibilities of activism within professional academic associations, based on the author's efforts to advocate for graduate students and non-tenure-track faculty within the Modern Language Association. Here again, the hypocrisy and resistance to change that one often finds among tenured professors emerges as a barrier. This hurdle may be surmounted partly by drawing links between the erosion of professional standards and the super-exploitation of non-tenure-track faculty. One can also appeal to the long-term self-interest of tenure-track faculty by pointing to the downward impact on their bargaining power resulting from the growing "reserve army" of non-tenure-track faculty.

Barbara Gottfried and Gary Zabel's chapter recounts the "multi-campus approach to organizing" employed by the Boston area Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL) (p. 207). COCAL's regional structure enabled it to "go beyond collective bargaining issues to address broad questions of equity and democratic power," similar to recent living-wage and student anti-sweatshop campaigns (p. 207). Another advantage of this structure is its ability to make contact with and link together a wide range of non-union groups such as AAUP advocacy chapters, faculty and student governance institutions, and off-campus people's organizations with a stake in education. Such inclusiveness can enhance the education of open-minded administrators and (more importantly) the broader public about the costs of the commodification of education and the democratic benefits of education as citizenship training broadly defined. Moreover, by reducing the isolation of individual non-tenure-track faculty, a COCAL-type multi-campus structure can give them a stronger basis for defending their interests within extant union locals and other campus bodies.

The democracy and inclusiveness themes are reinforced by the book's final chapter, by Susan Meisenhelder (with Kevin Mattson), which considers the statewide efforts of activists within the California Faculty Association (CFA) to build "one big union" of faculty *and students* within the California State University (CSU) system -- a union that

can "articulate a new vision for higher education based upon the democratic role that professors must play in assuring the highest quality of education for all of America's citizens" (pp. 221-222). The CFA waged a successful public campaign against the CSU administration's insidious merit pay system and secured the cancellation of an administrative "technological initiative" that would have given a monopoly over info-tech aspects of curriculum to a corporate consortium in "a blatant step toward privatizing the university" (p. 224). These victories were based in large part on CFA activists' ability to reinvigorate the union by advocating for non-tenure-track faculty, which involved pursuit of "a twofold strategy: In the short term, we needed to improve the quality of life for our part-time instructors; in the long term, we needed to push back against the administration's overuse of part-timers, that is, we needed to push for more full-time appointments" (p. 226). At the same time, an effort was made to educate the public on the conditions faced by non-tenure-track faculty. Combined with the development of a democratic and community-based vision of education to counter the administration's "attempt to make the university into a corporation," this inclusive approach helped undercut the usual administrative strategy of depicting faculty as a privileged, underworked, and purely self-interested elite opposed to the taxpayer (p. 224).

Steal This University is extremely useful not only as an overview of the corporate models being applied to universities but also as an organizing handbook for those who want to "prevent the academy from being remade entirely in the image of the corporation" (p. 236).