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Faculty Unions at the Crossroads: Why Playing Defense Is a Losing Strategy

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Neoliberalism arrived late at colleges and universities, but now it is making up for lost time. The response by higher education unions—and by their faculty, staff, and graduate students—has been pathetic. The question is whether we, and our unions, will collectively wake up and offer a response commensurate with the shift taking place—as Chicago teachers began to do. To do so would require a mass movement, uniting students, faculty, staff, community, and debtors, and one that’s willing and able to engage in massive disruptive actions. Nothing less will succeed. If we are not prepared to offer such a response—and so far we have not been—then we have consigned ourselves to managing the retreat from quality public education for all.

Although attacks on free speech, such as that on University of Wisconsin professor William Cronon,¹ are mounting, they pale alongside the political-economic transformations in the academy: reductions in public funding and associated increases in student tuition and fees, the rise of a publicly funded for-profit sector, and the expansion of contingent academic labor.

What Do Unions Do?

If the purpose of a union is to file grievances, negotiate contracts, protect the terms and conditions of employment, and increase members’ pay and benefits, then for the last decade or more, higher education unions have been doing

an acceptable, if mediocre, job. But if the purpose of a union is for people to get together, collectively decide what matters to them, and put forward a vision of a different society and different values, then higher education unions are doing a lousy job. That is, higher education is being transformed and becoming privatized, and not only are we doing very little to oppose it, but also, most of our members do not understand what’s happening, we have not made connections to our natural allies, and we fail to see that the larger public blames us for decisions others are making.

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Too often, our unions think only in terms of what is (or seems) politically possible. Guided by surveys of what supposedly has public support, framed by hired (or in-house) experts, unions take the current political landscape for granted and try to maneuver for small victories within it. The union’s victory is a well-managed

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retreat, our battle cry “It could have been worse,” our boast that we were able to stop half of the right’s attack, and thanks to us things are not getting worse as fast as they might have been. Those claims are usually true, and it is a non-trivial accomplishment to slow the bleeding.

But with a few more such victories, we will be undone. We need unions to follow the 1968 slogan: “Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible.” That is, we need unions to begin the long-term deep organizing that will be necessary to change people’s conception of what is and is not possible.

The Political Economy of Higher Education in Transformation

Higher education receives bipartisan rhetorical support in Washington (except from Rick Santorum). George W. Bush’s Secretary of Education and President Obama agree that everyone needs at least a year or two of college, and they should have the support to achieve that goal.² But those statements have not been backed by action, in contrast to Ronald Reagan’s declaration that “government is not the solution, government is the problem.” In keeping with Reagan’s view, U.S. states reduced their higher education appropriations by 7 percent from 2000-2001 to 2008-2009, before the recession fully kicked in; things have only gone downhill since. The observation that public universities have gone from being state-funded to state-assisted to state-located is now commonplace.

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The cuts in public sector funding are accompanied by a whole set of rules that encourage privatization—which (in education as elsewhere) is almost entirely government funded. For example, the University of Phoenix gets more federal financial aid than any other university (and the next four highest aid recipients

are also for-profit universities), although it has low graduation rates (16 percent, one of the lowest in the nation), has low success in placing students in other universities, and offers a curriculum that many consider inferior and that is taught by an underpaid and underqualified faculty. In effect, money has been taken from public institutions and given to for-profits.

When public sector institutions receive less public funding, they can do several things:

- lower the quality of education by, say, raising class sizes and thus imposing speed-up on faculty
- degrade working conditions by, say, hiring adjuncts and temporary workers at dramatically lower pay and benefits
- put more focus on profit making, such as through external grants, patenting the results of research, and online education
- do more to attract students, such as obsessing about national ratings or trying to attract out-of-state higher-tuition-paying students by building fancy dorms and fitness centers
- above all, of course, raise tuition and fees

In practice, colleges and universities have done all of these things. By far the most money has come from increasing the cost to students and their parents. Considering all universities, *after* adjusting for inflation, tuition and fees have increased steadily over the last three decades from less than \$4,800 in 1976-1977 to more than \$13,900 in 2009-2010, a 192 percent increase (see Figure 1).

It would be easy to assume that since colleges are centrally about students and teachers, tuition and fee increases must reflect an increase in faculty salaries. That is not at all the case. A look at the real increase in faculty salaries for all of higher education, both public and private, from the first year with government reported data (1970-1971) to the most recent data (2009-2010) shows that salaries for full professors increased by 4.4 percent, and those for assistant professors increased 0.7 percent. Comparing this with the increase in student tuition and fees, it is pretty clear faculty are not the problem.

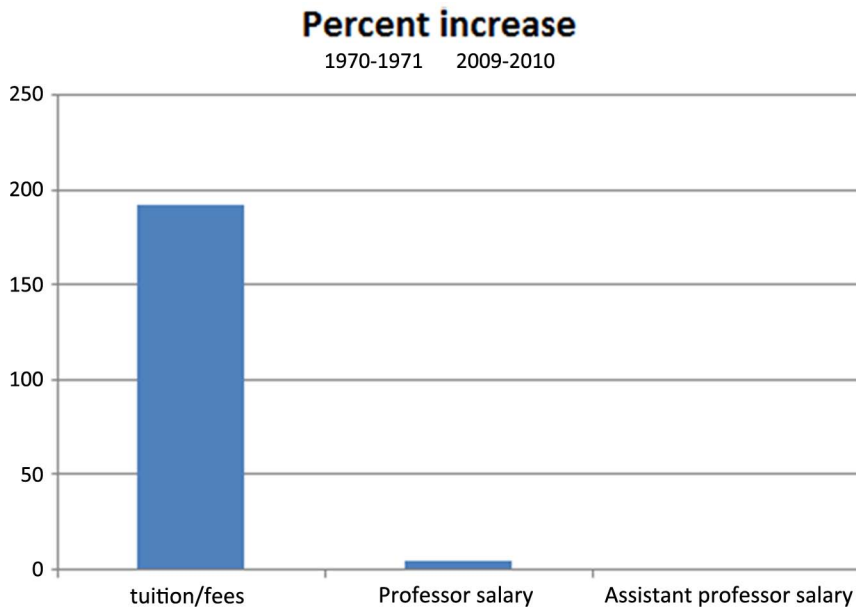


Figure 1. Are faculty salaries to blame for tuition (and fee) increases?

The salary data are for full-time, tenured faculty. In 1980, that was a majority of all faculty; today, it is less than a third. The typical part-time faculty member is paid dramatically less than a full-time tenure-system faculty member and typically gets no benefits to speak of. Thus, the minimal increase in pay is for faculty members holding the most privileged positions in the system, but most of the growth is coming in the underpaid and vulnerable jobs.

What Are Students to Do?

When colleges and universities raise tuition and fees, students and their families have limited options. If they are wealthy enough, they can just pay the increases, year after year. But for most students, the options are either to work more or to go deeper into debt.

A generation ago, a student could work a minimum wage job for ten hours a week and earn enough to cover the cost of tuition and fees. That is no longer the case. The minimum wage, in real terms, has stayed virtually unchanged, but tuition and fees have skyrocketed. At my own institution, the University of Massachusetts–Amherst,

the turning point was about 1988. Up to that time, a ten-hour-a-week job covered tuition and fees; today, a student would need to work more than thirty hours a week to do so (see Figure 2).

So, increasingly, what people do is borrow and go into student debt. In fact, part of the reason the costs of college have increased so fast is that students have been able to borrow money. If there were no student loans, there would have been a much fiercer fight against the increases in college costs. The total amount of student debt is now more than \$1 trillion, larger than total credit card debt. Two-thirds of seniors graduate with student debt, and it averages \$25,250; almost one in ten have \$40,000 or more in debt. Many students take on debt but fail to graduate, leaving them with debt but no greater earning power.

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Borrowing that money makes economic sense in a highly unequal society where college

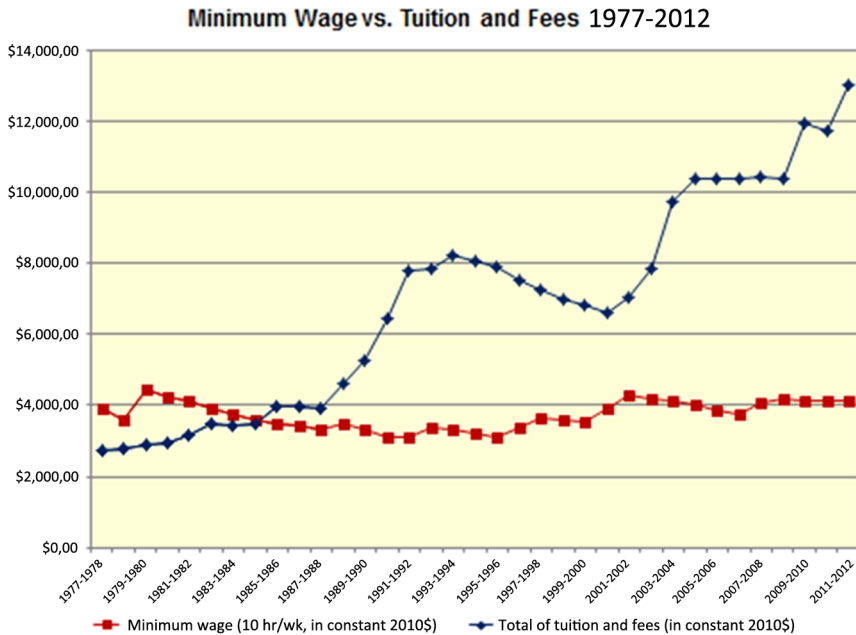


Figure 2. Can a student job cover tuition and fees?

graduates earn far more than high school graduates. If our society were more equal, and there were smaller income gaps between the college educated and everyone else, college would be more problematic in strictly economic terms, and there would be more push back against cost increases. Put another way, colleges and universities have a stake in seeing that we continue to have large economic inequalities.³

Where Unions Are

Unions have a significant presence in higher education. About a quarter of faculty and professional staff are union members or are covered by collective bargaining, and the same is true for about a fifth of graduate student employees. The great majority of unionized faculty and graduate students are at public sector institutions, where density is higher. There are almost no faculty unions at for-profit institutions.⁴ Perhaps surprisingly, there is a relatively small gap between the unionization rates for full-time and part-time faculty, with about a fourth of full-time and a fifth of part-time faculty covered by collective bargaining, and blue-collar campus workers are the most likely to be

unionized. There is plenty of room for growth within the existing model—from dining workers to adjunct faculty to teaching assistants—but we have shown little ability to win significant victories, or even to defend what we once had.

This is true even though many higher education unions fight hard for their members, file grievances on their behalf, fight pension and benefit cuts, and lobby the legislature for increased appropriations. Unions for contingent faculty have won increased job security and eligibility for benefits, along with “minor” issues (desks, phones, email addresses) that both matter in themselves and serve as markers of respect. And students have led militant campaigns against tuition and fee hikes.

But it is very hard to swim against the tide, and the limits of our current strategies are everywhere to be seen: Students battle, but tuition keeps shooting up; we lobby for increased state appropriations but they keep going down; we try to guarantee good jobs for faculty but tenure-system positions are in decline; faculty fight for higher salaries, but pay at public universities (where faculty unions are strongest) is losing ground to pay at private universities. On

average, a full professor at a doctoral institution in the public sector is paid 31.7 percent less than one in the same category of institution in the private sector. (And for a dozen years in a row, pay for top administrators has increased faster than pay for faculty.)

What Would Be Needed to Win

Many higher education unions in practice, although not typically in theory, are content to manage an orderly retreat, holding the troops together and avoiding a full-scale rout. Planning sessions and discussions about the future are almost always framed in terms of what we could realistically hope to accomplish, if we could get 50 percent more people to attend lobby day, or could pull together an authoritative report on the problem, or could double the attendance at our next rally, or had one hundred people prepared to be arrested at a (scripted for the media) civil disobedience action. I have been part of many such discussions and expect to be part of many more. It's all worth doing. We sometimes stage impressive actions, turning out hundreds of people, but none of what we are now doing will lower tuition and fees, reduce student debt, increase tenure-system faculty, or make us once again public institutions.

It is useful to approach the question from the other end. What would we need to do to create the kind of system we believe should exist? What kind of organizations, and what kind of actions, would we create if our goal were (not to slow the bleeding, but rather) to realize our vision for higher education, a vision that included such elements as

- public universities to be public, that is, free, just as high school is;
- former students to be free of debt they took on because as a society we gave rich people tax cuts and made students pay outrageous tuitions;
- every person working in higher education, whether faculty or staff, to have a secure job, decent pay and benefits, and the freedom to speak out on the issues without fear of retaliation;
- colleges and universities to be models of the kind of society we would like to create, whether the issue is democracy or the environment; and
- higher education to be more concerned to serve the people than to generate grant money, willing to put resources into students who struggle, not just those with the potential to win awards.

The problem we face is precisely that we are confronting institutions and issues at the heart of neoliberalism, and doing so at a time when the political spectrum has shifted rightward. We cannot win at one university or in one state; we cannot transform colleges and universities without taking on many other aspects of the system. That does not necessarily mean that we need a planned-from-the-top national campaign. A movement may start unexpectedly in one place—say, with a comparative handful of people staying in a park and raising issues that had largely been missing from national debates.

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My reading of history is that if we are to win, it will require at least three things: a mass movement uniting students, faculty, staff, debtors, and community members; a willingness and capacity to engage in disruptive actions that impose significant costs on the people with power; and the commitment to sustain those actions for as long as it takes.

Unions may want to limit the fight to the concerns of their own members and may fear that combining with others in a mass movement will mean the union loses control. Peculiarly enough, however, to win even on the narrow interests of their own members—whether faculty, graduate students, or staff—it will be necessary to be part of a larger movement. By ourselves, we lose, and if we are fighting only for our own interests, we should lose. But most people who work at

public colleges and universities have a commitment to a larger public good. Any movement for change must include students, and students must be leaders in the movement. Sometimes, that will mean taking actions and positions that make (some) faculty uncomfortable, but it will also mean an infusion of energy and vision.⁵

Students must be leaders in the movement [for change].

Second, no movement has won significant social change simply by lobbying, or even by demonstrations. Movements have to impose significant costs on those with power, and that involves activity that in some way disrupts the normal functioning of institutions, although sometimes that disruption can be as simple as occupying public space, whether a lunch counter or a park. If our unions and nongovernmental organizations have too much to lose (pensions, buildings, reserve funds) to risk such actions, then the actions need to be taken by other groups and coalitions. Integral to neoliberalism is corporations' use of subcontractors to avoid legal liability (and often even public relations blame): "We had no idea those goods were made by sweated labor, it's not our fault, we'll stop using that subcontractor." Perhaps our unions can do the same: make a grant to an independent group that happens to be organizing protests, even (we'd be "shocked, shocked" to discover) militant disruptive protests.⁶

Third, successful social movements are sustained over time. One current form of civil disobedience is the carefully scripted, planned-in-advance, coordinated with the police, one-time action taken for the purpose of getting a story on the news; arrests are needed to make the event newsworthy, and the more people arrested the bigger the story. The next day, life can return to normal. But a strike, or a bus boycott, or an occupation aims to go on for as long as it takes, and although it generates media, it relies for its power on its ability to impose a sustained cost on those with power. The Quebec student strike did not declare moral victory after a day or week or month; its sustained power led to a

change of government and complete repeal of the proposed tuition increases, just as the militancy of Chicago teachers led to a victory there.

For any movement facing a seemingly impregnable power structure, the challenge appears impossible—until the movement develops a winning strategy and new tactics. That is certainly the case here, so the suggestions that follow are necessarily speculative and tentative.

If we decide to target the people with power over funding and debt, that means billionaires, banks, and corporations, not just administrators. We need concrete demands. Perhaps a ten-year plan: each year, 10 percent of student debt will be canceled, and there will be a 10 percent reduction in the cost of each public college and university, with the full amount plus an increment to be made up through an increase in the state appropriation, and the full increase to come from additional taxes paid by the 1 percent. We could target specific billionaires, banks, and corporations, with guerilla demonstrations and disruptions, costing those banks and businesses respect, customers, and profits. These could be community actions, joined by alumni debtors, parents, and community members, as well as students, staff, and faculty. Unions could organize instructors (both faculty and graduate students) to sign statements pledging to treat student participation in such demonstrations as excused absences, as worthy, and as good for the school as playing in a football game.

We in higher education unions face a choice. We can fight by ourselves, for our own interests, and play within the system. We will lose, but with luck, maybe we can slow the erosion. Or we can join with allies, above all students and debtors, to articulate a broader vision of a better system, and work together to realize it. We may not win, but even a modest movement is likely to do more for us than within-the-system actions. And if we dare to struggle, we just might win.

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Notes

1. When Cronon posted a blog message urging Wisconsinites to investigate Governor Walker's "well-planned and well-coordinated national campaign," a Republican state assemblyman filed an open records request for his personal emails—including any memorandum that contains the words "Republican," "Scott Walker," and "union," among others (see Cronon's blog, available at <http://scholarcitizen.williamcronon.net/2011/03/24/open-records-attack-on-academic-freedom/>, for the full request).
2. See Dan Clawson and Max Page, *The Future of Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2011) for this and for much of the other information presented in this article.
3. See Bob Meister, "Debt and Taxes: Can the Financial Industry Save Public Universities?" *Representations* 116, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 128-155.
4. Joe Berry and Helena Worthen, "Faculty Organizing in the Higher Education Industry: Tackling the For-Profit Business Model," *WorkingUSA* 15, no. 3 (September 2012): 427-440.
5. On my own campus, the faculty union is a driving force behind PHENOM, the Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts, which works to unite students, faculty, staff, and community into one organization across the entire higher education system, from community colleges to research universities. At the University of Massachusetts–Amherst campus, union leaders are committed to that unity; at the statewide level, union leaders are rather wary about the relationship.
6. This idea was inspired by Stephen Lerner, but he is not responsible for this formulation.

Author Biography

Dan Clawson teaches sociology at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst, where he was president of the faculty union. He is the author of *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements* and (with Max Page) of *The Future of Higher Education*, and serves on the board of the Massachusetts Teachers Association.