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Tangles in the Tapestry

Cultural Barriers to Graduate Student Unionization

Introduction

The cultural landscape of graduate employee life in the research university faces significant change. Ten years ago just a handful of recognized graduate employee unions existed. Today, more than two dozen campuses have recognized unions and another two dozen or so are in the process of organizing graduate student employees (Rhoades & Rhoads, 2003). There are indications that graduate student unions have reached a critical mass, tripling their membership to almost 40,000 students (Smallwood, 2001). Consequently, unionization among graduate employees, especially teaching assistants, shows no signs of slowing, with numerous mobilizing campaigns under way at the time of finalizing this article (Smallwood, 2001; Van Der Werf, 2001). Additionally, although union activity has taken place mostly at public research universities, graduate employees at private institutions such as Yale and NYU have also had some success in unionizing. At NYU, for example, the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW) and gained official recognition from the university in March of 2001.

Nationwide, graduate student employees have demanded the same rights accorded to other unionized workers: collective bargaining, reasonable workload, pay increases, health benefits, and grievance proce-

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dures (Barba, 1994b). Graduate students now gather regularly at the Coalition of Graduate Employee Union's (CGEU) annual meeting to discuss work-related issues and advance collective action. Also, long-standing graduate unions at the University of Michigan, University of Wisconsin, and University of Oregon serve as valuable contacts for more recent organizing (Rhoades & Rhoads, 2003).

Despite the obvious strength of the movement, graduate student unionization efforts have encountered significant resistance. This should not be too surprising given that conflict is inevitable when introducing change to the academy (Tierney, 1993, 1999). Perhaps Nathan Glazer's words three decades removed remain quite compelling: "In the end, it is rather easier to change the world than the university" (1970, p. 193). Indeed, structural components of the academy, including academic departments, are seen as difficult if not impossible to transform (Birnbaum, 1988; Tierney, 1999).

Resistance to change efforts not only arise from structures within an organization, but also from members who support them, including administrators, faculty, and students (Astin, 2001). However, the actions of organizational participants need to be understood within the larger framework of culture. The norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes embedded in the daily lives of institutional actors give meaning to an organization and, in part, represent what has come to be known as "organizational culture" (Tierney, 1988). Consequently, it is difficult to understand change and resistance without taking into account the culture of a particular organization.

As an emergent phenomenon, graduate student unionization may be understood as a form of change that challenges the cultural fabric of the academy. Arguably, making sense of how unionization interacts with the norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and so forth existing within the academy is imperative to understanding the phenomenon itself.

With the preceding in mind, we seek to better understand cultural barriers to graduate employee unionizing. This is important for two reasons. First, knowledge of cultural barriers may be helpful to graduate students and university officials who seek to facilitate collective organizing. While it is the exception and not the rule for universities to openly support graduate employee organizing, certainly lack of information should not be the reason for such resistance. Second, more advanced knowledge of cultural barriers to unionization is likely to expedite university compliance if a graduate employee contract is collectively negotiated between a union and a particular institution.

In analyzing barriers to graduate student unionization, we employ cultural understandings of organizational life, drawing on the significant

body of literature on organizational culture (hence, we speak of the barriers as "cultural barriers"). Methodologically speaking, we employ a case study approach as we examine graduate employee unionization at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the midst of contract implementation.

Graduate Employee Unionization

The literature on graduate employee unionization has primarily addressed four areas, including potential benefits and shortcomings of unionization for graduate students and the academy, university debates about the proper role and identity of graduate student employees, the historical, political, and social influences of unionization efforts, and specific instances of collective bargaining.

The graduate student labor movement is often traced back to 1969, when organizers of the Teaching Assistants Association at the University of Wisconsin are credited as being the first graduate student organization to successfully unionize (Saltzman, 2000). Others, such as the University of Oregon and the University of Michigan, were soon to follow (Hays, 1977). Although graduate employees have sought representation for the past four decades, successful organizing has burgeoned in the 1990s (Rhoades & Rhoads, 2003; Saltzman, 2000; Smallwood, 2001).

Early graduate employee labor movements, such as those at the University of Wisconsin in 1969 and at the University of California at Berkeley in 1965 (a union was not successfully formed at the time), have been attributed in part to the prevailing student movement of the times (Rhoades & Rhoads, 2003; Saltzman, 2000). Barba (1994a) suggested that in addition to the highly politicized state of graduate students in the 1960s, budget crises in the mid 1970s also precipitated graduate student labor movements. Bread and butter concerns as well as the heightened social consciousness of the early student organizers are still reflected in recent unionization activities (Rhoades & Rhoads, 2003). Most of the key issues that motivated students in the past are still of concern today: reasonable workloads, fair wages, improved health care, and impartial grievance procedures (Barba, 1994a, 1994b; Jannette & Joseph, 1994; Lockhart, 1989; Saltzman, 2000; Vaughn, 1998; Villa, 1991).

In terms of potential benefits and shortcomings, some faculty and administrators have voiced concerns that standards of academic quality may be threatened by unionization if departments have to hire graduate students based upon seniority and not scholarly merit (Vaughn, 1998). However, many of these concerns have not been realized at universities where graduate employee unions have existed for many years (Rhoades

& Rhoads, 2003). Additionally, scholars have discussed administrative concerns about the potential threat a union environment poses to student-faculty relationships (Barba 1994a, 1994b; Hays, 1977; Lockhart, 1989). This argument has been countered by Hewitt (1999), who surveyed some 300 faculty at five universities with graduate employee unions and found that 92% do not believe that unions make it more difficult to instruct graduate students. He also found that an overwhelming majority supports the rights of graduate employees to unionize.

A portion of the literature on graduate employee unionizing focuses on a reoccurring barrier to organizing activities centered around the confusing position graduate assistants occupy as both students and employees (Barba 1994a, 1994b; Rhoades, 1999; Rhoades & Rhoads, 2003; Villa, 1991). Administrations, often resistant to graduate student organizing, have made the case to labor relations boards and the courts that graduate assistants are apprentices, not employees (Rhoades, 1999). Such arguments have generally emphasized the academic nature of graduate student positions (Villa, 1991). Administrators have also pointed out that graduate assistantships are part of the financial aid package offered to students and that such stipends amount to more money than part-time faculty are likely to receive for similar work (Villa, 1991). Universities, though, often find themselves caught in contradictory positions. For example, Rhoades (1999) points out that student status within the University of California has varied depending upon the economic benefits attached to different designations. For example, the UC system President Richard Atkinson argued to the state employment board that collective bargaining rights should be denied to graduate students because they were apprentices and not employees. At the same time, UC administrators claimed that students who were paid through the university were necessarily employees and therefore the university claimed the right to own any intellectual property created by the student employee.

Rhoades (1999) further notes that graduate students also make ironic demands. Some students are simultaneously working for employee status while at the same time pushing for greater apprenticeship rights by asking faculty to assume a greater mentorship role. The conundrum for many graduate students is that their apprenticeship has turned into what they see as exploitation (Nelson, 1995). This is especially egregious in a job market where apprenticeship may not lead to employment. When graduate students at Yale began communicating about their work conditions, they learned that what some students had thought of as "unique" situations were really "systemic injustices" that revealed common abuse of graduate student work (Jannette & Joseph, 1994).

Despite the growth and success of unionization in addressing campus

labor issues, not all graduate employees are in favor of collective action, and within the majority of higher education institutions that employ graduate students there has not been serious discussion of unionizing (Barba, 1994b; Vaughn, 1998). Graduate student employees may be thwarted from unionizing by rigid state laws that still deny employee status to those whose work is related to their enrollment as students (Saltzman, 2000). It is also possible that students worry that unionization will erode graduate student social status, and some may feel that getting involved in unionization is a gamble (Vaughn, 1998). For example, students may fear that being active in union organizing will negatively label them and harm their chances for future employment within the academy. There is a particular "idiosyncrasy" of graduate employee unions, as opposed to the typical collective bargaining unit, since graduate students recognize their state as temporary. Graduate students are not facing an "interminable future" without rights, since they will eventually finish their degrees, run out of funding, or change careers (Vaughn, 1998).

In summarizing the extant literature on graduate employee unionization, one gains only minimal understanding of key barriers to graduate student unionizing efforts, including barriers to the successful implementation of a negotiated agreement. Clearly, empirically based understandings of the process of graduate employee unionization are needed. Thus, in what follows we offer a theoretical framework for examining cultural barriers to graduate employee unionization.

Organizational Culture

The study of colleges and universities as cultures has become central to organizational analyses in higher education (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988; Tierney, 1988). In examining scholarly conceptions of culture, however, Kuh and Whitt (1988) have observed that there are as many definitions of culture as there are scholars studying the phenomenon. Consequently, we review some of the background associated with organizational culture as a theoretical framework. Ultimately, though, we intend to clarify our position by employing Schein's (1992) framework for thinking about culture.

The study of organizational cultures emerged in the 1970s and has gained prominence over subsequent decades (Morgan, 1986). The impetus for such studies rested in the effort by U.S. organizational analysts to make sense of the country's declining economic influence and the growing strength of the Japanese economy (Ouchi, 1981). In addition, increasing multidisciplinary approaches to organizational inquiry, particularly from anthropological and sociological perspectives, led to greater

attention to elements of organizational life typically associated with cul-
ture, including rituals, symbols, beliefs, and interpretations. In time,
analytical theories of culture came to influence organizational analyses
of colleges and universities (Bergquist, 1992; Kuh & Whitt, 1988;
Masland, 1985; Tierney, 1988).

Although cultural paradigms have proliferated over the past two
decades, agreement about the essentials of organizational culture does
not come easily. Deal and Kennedy (1983) argued that culture is by def-
inition implicit, hard to characterize, and taken for granted. A commonly
held view of culture includes the norms, values, beliefs, ceremonies, tra-
ditions, and symbols that constitute a particular organization (Bolman &
Deal, 1997). But, culture also may be seen as the shared assumptions
held by individuals participating in a given organization (Morgan,
1986). Such assumptions may be observed in various symbols or rituals
to which deep meanings often are assigned.

Culture is formed and reflected by members of an organization
through everyday activities (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Masland, 1985;
Schwartz & Davis, 1981; Tierney, 1988). In part, the people who make
up the organization create culture through their interpretations of daily
events as well as through their understandings and actions linked to the
organization's history and important symbols (Tierney, 1988). Interpre-
tations may differ on several levels, between individuals, departments,
institutions, and so forth. In this regard, culture may be viewed as an in-
terconnected web that is understood by recognizing both the underlying
structure and the participants' actions and interpretations (Geertz, 1973).

For the purposes of this study, we have found Schein's (1992) discus-
sion of the three levels of culture most helpful. Schein argues that cul-
ture may be seen as existing at three different levels—the level of *arti-
facts,* the level of *espoused values,* and the level of *basic assumptions.*
Artifacts consist of organizational structures and processes and include
group behaviors, norms, or rituals. Within the level of artifacts, norms
speak to the various actions that become central to organization life but
have yet to achieve the deeper meanings conveyed by rituals and tradi-
tions. A student speaking with her or his advisor about possible courses
for the upcoming semester is an example of a commonly accepted norm.
Rituals share the behavioral elements of norms but convey a deeper
meaning. Traditions are similar to rituals, but tend to be more formalized
and grandiose.

Within the levels of values and assumptions, myths, beliefs, attitudes,
and feelings comprise key elements of the interpretive dimension. *Es-
poused values* reflect the group's shared values or beliefs. These values
or beliefs can be articulated at the conscious level and are identifiable by

members of the group. These aspects of organizational life convey deep meanings that at times may be difficult to explain from a rational perspective (indeed, basic assumptions may not be recognized at all!).

More deeply embedded, and less conscious than espoused values, are the *basic assumptions.* These implicit assumptions guide behavior as well as thoughts, feelings, and reactions to events, experiences, and ideas. Beliefs may be part of complex and deeply felt value systems, perhaps linked to one's religion or other ideologies. Myths project complex stories and narratives about organizational actors and histories that reinforce particular understandings about the organization (Clark, 1972).

These levels are highly interactive and dynamic. Symbols may call to mind powerful emotions such as anger or compassion. Rituals have embedded assumptions about how and why certain behaviors are practiced. Students are excused from class attendance to observe national holidays based on assumptions about the importance of honoring religious or patriotic occasions. Hence, culture, as expressed by Schein, may be understood from the perspective of one or more of the three levels. In addition, examining one level is likely to shed light on the other levels. Although each of the three levels is distinguishable, the levels are also closely interwoven. That is, each of the levels of culture is to be understood in relation to the other levels, as they interrelate and reinforce an organization's culture. Schein's model thus provides an exceptional set of constructs for making sense of the complexities of culture.

Background

The study is situated at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), a Doctoral Extensive university with an undergraduate population of roughly 25,000 and a graduate student body of over 7,000. UCLA is, of course, part of the larger University of California (UC) system that includes universities in Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Riverside, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, San Diego, and San Francisco.

Although graduate student unionization efforts within the UC system originated from activity at the UC Berkeley campus, predominantly in the early 1960s, the latter stages of this process reflected more of a systemwide student effort, with graduate students often joining forces with undergraduate readers and tutors. In terms of unionization activity specific to the UCLA campus, graduate employees sought to unionize in 1977, affiliating with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). But as was the case elsewhere within the UC system, graduate students were unable to gain recognition from the UC administration. This has been the story of graduate student initiatives throughout the '60s, '70s, and '80s.

It was not until 1989 that the UC administration temporarily recognized the union, which by now had affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW). But temporary recognition was removed after the California Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) ruled in favor of the university, essentially saying that the university was not required by law to recognize the graduate employee union. Over the next several years cases were adjudicated, appealed, and reopened, with the key decision coming in 1999, when the California PERB finally recognized UCLA's SAGE (Student Association of Graduate Employees), thus opening the door to graduate student unionization throughout the UC system.

Union recognition proved to be only half the battle as the eight graduate employee bargaining units for the UC universities locked heads with the administration for months. Finally, after more than a year of acrimonious debates, the UC administration and the graduate employee union reached a contract agreement in May of 2000. In the fall of the same year, the contract took effect throughout the UC system. The thrust of the contract, as it pertains to the UCLA campus, focuses on the following points: positions covered by the contract (all employed readers, tutors, teaching assistants campuswide), advanced posting of available graduate positions, formal appointment procedures, formalized evaluation procedures, workload guidelines, a formal grievance procedure, wage increases, and fee remissions. The challenge for the university has been passing on these new guidelines to appropriate faculty and staff and, of course, ensuring their compliance. This, in part, is what our study seeks to examine by focusing on various cultural barriers.

The basic research questions guiding this study may be stated as follows: What are the organizational barriers to graduate student unionization? How might these barriers be understood from a cultural perspective? Two additional questions helped galvanize the study: What are the benefits to examining graduate student unionization from a cultural perspective? What kind of guidance might a cultural approach to organizations suggest in terms of understanding graduate employee unionization and administrative response?

Method

Given the emerging nature of the phenomenon as well as the contextual complexity associated with understanding organizational culture and change, a flexible data collection and analytical approach was needed. Accordingly, we chose case study as an appropriate method. Case study methodology, as Yin (1989) argues, is well suited to study a phenomenon that is somewhat ambiguous in nature. Furthermore, the

qualitative aspects of case study methods are most helpful in examining the experiences and perceptions of graduate students, faculty, and administrators at the university.

The team of researchers collaboratively designed and implemented this study, including analysis and interpretation of the data. Overall, the collaborative process allowed the study to take shape iteratively. Most importantly, the study benefitted from ongoing interaction around theory and method. For example, the team continually revised the kinds of theoretical assumptions used to make sense of the project. As our knowledge of the subject area grew, we found it necessary to revisit earlier assumptions that had guided our thinking. This is in keeping with one of the strengths of qualitative methodology—flexibility (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Participants

In terms of data collection, we relied primarily on formal, structured interviews, although considerable documents, including the union contract, were also collected and analyzed. Participants were purposely sampled from the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies (GSE & IS) and the College of Letters and Sciences (L & S). Because the arts and humanities (L & S), social sciences (L & S), natural sciences (L & S), and professional studies (GSE & IS) are represented by these two schools (L & S and GSE & IS), we believed it to have captured a wide range of academic fields at the university.

In order to address our research questions, interview participants were selected based on their likelihood of meeting at least one of the following criteria: involvement in graduate employee organizing, extensive participation as or knowledge of the teaching assistant role, knowledge of the unionization process and its outcomes, involvement in the administration of the union contract, and involvement with teaching assistants while serving on the faculty. In all, we interviewed 34 participants, consisting of 19 graduate students, 9 administrators, and 6 faculty. Among these participants, 7 were from GSEI & IS (education) and 27 were from L & S (arts and humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences). Our sample consisted of 17 males and 17 females. Our wide selection follows Geert's (1998) argument that an organization's culture is assumed to reside in all members, not only its managers or chief executives, and that information from the culture should be collected from samples of all groups.

Procedures

Each of the interviews began with elicitations concerning the participants' knowledge of and experience with the graduate student unionization process. We also asked participants about how other members of

their group (graduate students, faculty, or administrators) perceive the other two groups as it relates to the unionization process. Opinions of how unionization has affected, and could potentially affect, working relationships among their colleagues and with those outside their immediate group gradually followed at the subjects' own pace. Here we follow Riessman's (1993) suggestion that it is beneficial to employ less structure in the interest of giving more control to respondents. Therefore, we had broad topics in mind, while trying to maintain flexibility in the sequence of topics and allowing other unexpected topics to arise.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved developing an informal list of codes based on an initial reading of the transcripts. The initial codes thus were derived inductively from the data and reflect Patton's (1990) emphasis on the inductive strengths of qualitative analysis. The next step involved teams of two researchers working together to code a subset of the typed transcripts. The initial coding was done individually, but then the coding teams were brought together to reach consensus on the various coding categories applied to the transcripts. Where differences were evident, the coding teams resolved the differences through discussion. When consensus could not be reached, a data category was simply coded as evidencing multiple characteristics. The use of multiple raters during the coding phase of the project increases interrater reliability and adds to the trustworthiness of the findings (Bernard, 2000; Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Once all transcripts were coded, the research team came together to identify the key categories around which the findings would be organized. This process involved both deductive and inductive processes. Deductive strategies were used as guides for organizing the data in that we examined the data categories in light of our theoretical perspective. Specifically, we used cultural constructs from Schein (1992)—artifacts, values, and underlying assumptions—as a way to think about the coded data. Simultaneously, and in a somewhat dialectical fashion, we allowed the data to inductively guide our thinking about the relative strength and importance of the various cultural constructs.

Findings

Although Schein's three cultural levels provided a set of constructs for thinking about our data deductively, additional cross-cutting themes emerged around three dominant subcultures within the academy—student (graduate student), faculty, and administrative subcultures (we

came to these categories somewhat inductively, but we could have easily drawn similar conclusions based on the higher education literature; Hartnett & Centra, 1974; Kuh & Whitt, 1988). In essence, we found that the various aspects of culture as delineated by Schein were experienced and represented in different ways depending on one's position within the graduate student, faculty, or administrative subcultures. Consequently, in each of the subcultural categories, we apply Schein's model, focusing on artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions. Finally, inspired by the metaphor of "culture as a tapestry" (Kuh & Whitt, 1988), we constructed a conceptual framework focusing on how artifacts, values, and assumptions associated with the various subcultures act as *barriers* to graduate student unionization. Hence, we think of these barriers as "tangles" in the cultural tapestry (see Figure 1). The "x" figures represent the barriers, or "tangles" that impede graduate student unionization. While we treat these three subcultures as somewhat distinct for analytical purposes, the actuality is that there is much interaction, as will be demonstrated in the following sections.

Graduate Student Subculture

A central aspect of the graduate student subculture as it relates to unionization is the temporary organizational status of graduate students. Most graduate students are preparing to assume new roles within the
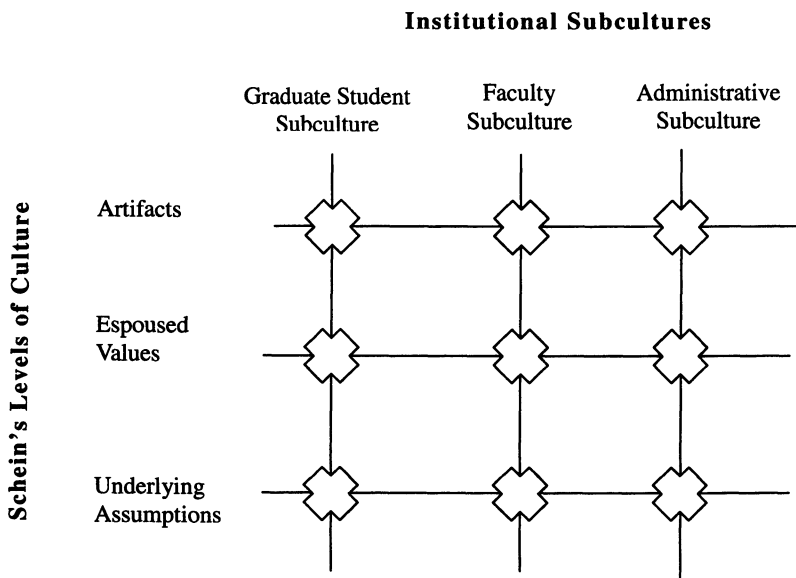

Fig. 1. Cultural Barriers to Graduate Student Unionization

world of professional work. Many see little reason to get involved in unionizing given that they aspire to leave their role as graduate employees. Their temporary status, combined with heavy academic and employment obligations, further encourages them to quickly proceed toward degree completion, forsaking as many distractions as possible along the way. As one graduate student organizer explained, "It takes a lot of time and energy to do your course work and in later stages, to do your dissertation. And so it's hard to budget enough time to do your academic work and be involved in union activities. I had to make a conscious choice to cut back on my union involvement in order to get out of here." A second graduate student noted, "Some students thought that the union was a big waste of time. That we should get our work done and get out of here."

As a consequence of being somewhat transient and being engaged in preparatory endeavors, graduate students value leaving graduate school and progressing to different opportunities in their lives. The comments from one student in particular speak to this issue: "Unlike other jobs where you get paid more the longer you stay, . . . there is no incentive for a graduate student to stay long. . . . So the more qualified you are suggests that you are probably expected to be on your way out." An underlying assumption linked to their temporary organizational status is a sense that being overworked and underpaid is to be expected. As one graduate employee admitted, "I think some of my peers, especially in the sciences see themselves as temporarily marginalized workers and can tolerate this because they know something better awaits them."

A second barrier linked to the graduate student subculture centers around the multiple and sometimes conflicting roles graduate student employees fill. Graduate students have responsibilities as students and therefore are concerned with their academic work. Additionally, graduate students serving as teaching assistants have significant responsibilities in educating undergraduates. Balancing these roles is challenging, and different campus constituencies define such roles in varying ways. For example, administrators often view graduate student TAs as "apprentices," describing the TA position as a "learning experience." Some administrators point out that graduate student employment opportunities are part of the financial aid package offered to students. Conversely, graduate student organizers who see such definitions undermining their status as workers reject the notion of the teaching assistantship as primarily a learning experience.

Even among graduate students there are conflicting values placed on their role as a TA. Some graduate students feel that "being a TA is part of the process of being a graduate student." Others clearly differentiate

their role as students and their work as teaching assistants. A graduate student organizer elaborates this latter position:

> When I'm teaching, and grading, or speaking in front of a class, or talking with students during office hours, or emailing students about assignments, then I'm a teacher and a worker. When I'm talking to my advisor, or working on my dissertation, or reading for one of my classes, then I'm a student. . . . It's pretty easy for me to distinguish them. The only reason it is even an issue is that being a student is a requirement to get the job. . . . If I don't show up to teach my class they won't kick me out of the PhD program. They might fire me. They are separate things.

The assumption expressed by the preceding student is that while the multiple roles related to being a graduate student may at times be quite complex, the roles nonetheless can be separated and understood as different kinds of activities. Such an assumption challenges administrative views of the TA position as more or less an apprenticeship. Given the contentiousness surrounding assumptions about the nature of the TAship, it is easy to see why one might consider the complexity of the TA role as a barrier to unionization.

Passive resistance is a third identifiable artifact that represents a barrier to graduate student unionization. Although graduate students did not resist unionization efforts, many chose not to participate in organizing. One explanation is that graduate students value their location within a professional class. Although they may define their location as a graduate employee as somewhat marginalized by comparison to their faculty mentors, graduate students nonetheless view their work as falling within the realm of professional activity. Relatedly, graduate students often embrace the assumption that professionals do not organize. Comments such as "Unions are for blue-collar workers" are not uncommon among graduate students. Reflecting this perspective, one graduate student commented, "There's a sense that strikes don't work and it's really couched in these terms that the university is not a factory and the industrial model doesn't work here." Faced with apathy, bordering on disdain at times, overcoming assumptions about unions and the nature of academic work serves as a major challenge in mobilizing graduate students.

Faculty Subculture

A key artifact representing a barrier to graduate student unionization is tied to the loosely coupled structure of academic life, especially at major research universities. Linked to the loosely coupled structure is a high degree of faculty autonomy, enabling professors to make many of their own choices regarding the nature of their work. A faculty member alludes to the loosely coupled quality of academic life: "The university is a

funny place to work. It's not like you can walk around and see everyone who's working. People are spread out all over the place and they're doing all different kinds of jobs. And it's not as though everyone is going in and out of the same entrance, . . . and they have so many different time commitments." Loose coupling is also reflected in the high degree of autonomy afforded to professors at research universities such as UCLA. Faculty autonomy has particular relevance to graduate students, given that faculty have significant power in shaping their relationships with graduate students. As one professor explained, "Many faculty simply do not want to alter their routine or normal way of doing things and they really don't have to." A second faculty member addressed the limits of graduate student unionizing, given the autonomy of faculty to make decisions concerning their relationships with graduate student workers: "There will be no changes in relationships. For faculty members, the union issue is tangential. It doesn't affect us either positively or negatively. If students ever have a problem with working with us or feeling overworked, the simplest and most effective way to remedy this is simply not to TA or work for that faculty member anymore." And a third faculty member flatly stated, "The contract won't be followed closely. People may pay lip service to it, but things won't change. This contract could limit everyone's flexibility. We are in academia. We should have the autonomy to make our own decisions without having to follow all these rules and criteria."

Loose coupling can lead to inertia at times, especially given that faculty may choose to resist change simply out of fear of disruption. Consequently, some faculty at UCLA have not been openly supportive of graduate student unionization, in part because of their resistance to organizational change in general. The following comments from a faculty member speak to the issues raised here:

> The fact that there is resistance to unionization cannot be attributed to a lack of caring about graduate student concerns among the faculty but rather the inertia that faculty have when it comes to changes. People don't want to hear it. They are resistant to change. The union is trying to break into this entrenched group. As a collective, it is hard to truly rally around change. Once you are here, you don't want people changing things on you. You want to continue to do it your way.

The preceding faculty member captures an important value many faculty hold: having a degree of control over the complex nature of their working lives. In many ways, faculty view themselves as "individualists" having the ability and authority to make decisions most suitable to their own professional interests. Giving up too much control to other organizational forces, including graduate employee unions, is seen as potentially disruptive. Thus, the underlying assumption here is that change is

likely to interfere with how faculty traditionally carry out their work. Another assumption here is that faculty have the right to make decisions about the nature of their working lives.

Administrative Subculture

Within the domain of the administrative subculture, a major artifact seen as a potential barrier to graduate student unionization is a form of administrative control bordering at times on paternalism. Administrators in this study tended to view their role as caretakers for the university. Graduate students engaged in negotiations with the administration perceived caretaking as an expression of paternalism. For example, some administrators expressed incredulity towards the unionization process, believing that the administration was best suited for caring for graduate students and their needs. Many felt that programs and procedures already in place could meet the needs of graduate students.

Paternalism was most evident during contract negotiations, after the graduate student union had already won recognition. For example, one administrator spoke of the time and effort that went into educating graduate students about how negotiations are supposed to work: "A lot of the time was spent on us educating the graduate students on what negotiations are all about." Another questioned the understanding graduate students have of the union's commitment to them: "The students who are bargaining don't have a clue that the union may have little interest in TAs." Others mentioned that graduate student negotiators did not seem to understand that they must give something up in order to get something from the university.

The espoused value associated with administrative control is linked to the commitment administrators have to the university and the important role they see themselves playing in directing the organization. In short, they place great value on their role in shaping the nature of the university. The underlying assumption is that administrators in many ways define themselves as the university, often employing the terms "we" in discussing the institution. Interestingly, no other group participating in this study used the pronoun "we" in describing the university. The strong identification with the institution in part explains administrative resistance to graduate student unionization, given that a union has the ability to exert influence over the organization.

Discussion

An empirical examination of graduate student unionization is both timely and necessary, especially considering the increased organizing

activity at universities nationwide and the little empirical evidence that exists in understanding this growing movement. Our major research questions were as follows: *What are the organizational barriers to graduate student unionization? How might these barriers be understood from a cultural perspective?* As demonstrated in our findings, we identified many barriers according to each of the three major subcultures (graduate students, faculty, and administrators) and showed how these barriers could be framed according to Schein's three levels of culture. In the following sections we discuss these findings in greater depth. Here, we also address our subquestions: *What are the benefits to examining graduate student unionization from a cultural perspective? What kind of guidance might a cultural approach to organizations suggest in terms of understanding graduate employee unionization and administrative response?* We then discuss how our cultural approach can guide and benefit the study of graduate student unionization.

Graduate Student Subculture

Within the graduate student subculture, barriers to union organizing and participation mostly revolve around issues linked to the temporary employment status of graduate students combined with their multiple roles as students and employees. Graduate student employees who perceive themselves as apprentices and are willing to accept marginality during their academic careers as graduate students tend to regard their TA duties as part of their learning experience.

These findings shed much light on the most observable barrier to graduate student unionization: nonparticipation. Similar to other graduate student unionization movements, only a self-selected few actively take on the challenge towards unionization. While all employed readers, tutors, and teaching assistants were directly affected by the unionization contract, we encountered some difficulty in identifying individuals who were directly involved in the unionization process or understood the contract well enough to comment on it. Our findings indicate that one of the major reasons for the lack of extensive participation in the unionization process was students' perception that unionization does not carry long-term benefits, particularly considering their short-term stay at the university. Students also felt any difficulties they temporarily encountered as TAs as being simply part of their socialization process.

Interestingly, graduate students did not feel that unionization negatively affected their relationships with their professors. This non-barrier was somewhat unexpected, given that scholars anticipated that the union environment would threaten student-faculty relationships (Barba, 1994a, 1994b; Hays, 1977; Lockhart, 1989). Instead, the students resounded

that their interactions with faculty were not adversely affected. This finding supports Hewitt's (1999) research that faculty generally do not perceive their interactions with students as being negatively affected by unionization. A few students even commented that some results of unionization—eased workload and better working conditions—improved their performance and, consequently, their relations with faculty. One possible explanation might be that unionization contractually limits time and energy on teaching, and graduate students are thus able to devote themselves more towards other commitments, such as research projects and other scholarship endeavors. Particularly, given that Doctoral Extensive institutions like UCLA share a strong commitment to research, unionization might even have facilitated improved working relationships between faculty and graduate students. Whereas research positions are necessary for socialization into academic careers in research institutions, teaching positions are often not considered a requisite for professional development (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Another explanation might be that the power differential between faculty and students are so imbedded, potential changes in their relationships were dismissed. Any potential threat on faculty-student relationships that unionization posed might have been immediately addressed or avoided.

Faculty Subculture

Within the faculty subculture, the relative autonomy of faculty roles and responsibilities, combined with a loosely coupled system of a major research university such as UCLA, serve as significant barriers to graduate student unionization. Professional autonomy and emphasis on research (over teaching) reflect deeply held beliefs and underlying assumptions that perpetuate faculty apathy relevant to graduate student unionizing. Research suggests that these kind of values are found at other large research universities where graduate students are presumably to be employed as instructors (Clark, 1987). Logically, it is reasonable to assume that the barriers within the faculty subculture identified here will also occur at other large research universities where graduate student organizing is likely to take place.

The lack of involvement of faculty in organizational concerns associated with graduate student unionization calls to mind the classic "cosmopolitan" professor. Cosmopolitans tend to be disengaged in local institutional affairs, while devoting significant attention to disciplinary interests extending beyond the local institution (Clark, 1987; Gouldner, 1957; Merton, 1957). For the cosmopolitans, large research universities such as UCLA provide a home base, whereby they can explore and advance their research endeavors. Given their relative autonomy combined

with reward structures that privilege research, faculty at such institutions are often less committed to teaching and disinterested in administrative matters. For these faculty, graduate students have become a key resource in meeting undergraduate teaching responsibilities. However, graduate student unionization poses a challenge to many of the long-standing practices associated with faculty supervision of and work with teaching assistants. Thus, for cosmopolitans it may seem easier to turn to beliefs and assumptions about faculty autonomy rather than face administrative responsibilities linked to changing relationships between the university and graduate student employees.

Administrative Subculture

Turning to the administrative subculture, it is important to note that administrators now deal with much of the governance within the large research university. Given that cosmopolitan faculty are primarily responsive to the needs of their disciplinary field, administrators take on a considerable burden of the institution's affairs. The tasks and responsibilities that administrators at UCLA carry are more complex and demanding than the administrative needs at smaller, less complex colleges. Because of their closeness to and responsibility for many of the most pressing organizational issues, administrators tend to see themselves *as the university*. At UCLA, it has been the administration that mostly has dealt with the dilemmas raised by graduate student unionization, including the significant economic and logistical issues. None too surprisingly, cultural barriers to graduate student unionization visible within the administrative subculture are intricately linked to a perception of their role as caretakers.

The paternalistic attitude from most administrators combined with their direct dealings with unionization leaders appears to create greater conflict for administrator-student relationships than for faculty-student relationships. One graduate student union leader pointed out, "The faculty don't determine our salary; they don't give us fee remissions; they don't have that power. So we appealed to the faculty and said this is not about you, it's about the administration." Administrative resistance posed one of the greatest barriers to graduate student unionization.

Nonetheless, administrators play an essential role for enacting policy change and desired outcomes, as well as for graduate student socialization. Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2000) explain, "It is incumbent upon faculty, administrators, and practicing professionals to socialize for expectations and outcomes that imply a seamless, continuous process from studenthood to desired professional roles yet one that also feeds back into itself for improving quality" (p. 100). Thus, administrators should

be most informed about the barriers to graduate student unionization, particularly their essential role in the process.

Benefits of a Cultural Approach

Beyond identifying the barriers to unionization from multiple spheres within the institution (i.e., graduate students, faculty, and administrative subcultures), this examination also demonstrates how unionization may be understood from multiple levels of the organization (artifacts, values, and assumptions). This approach serves several purposes. First, we not only identify the structural aspects of the institution, but also the inner meanings and interpretations that perpetuate and explain the more observable surface issues. This is an important and effective way to deal with barriers to goals such as unionization. Understanding and comparing the multiple, and possibly opposing, views are a starting place to address organizational conflicts. Second, the proposed matrix we utilize helps to untangle and organize the complexities involved with understanding the diverse perspectives of differentially located organizational groups and subcultures. Particularly in examining organizational culture, our matrix serves as a template for analyses of unionization at other institutions. Third, and perhaps most important, the matrix serves as a starting place for conceptualizing barriers to institutional innovation and change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings here demonstrate the cultural complexities of the unionization process. More specifically, our findings reveal several cultural barriers to unionization, each analyzed at the levels of artifacts, underlying assumptions, and values, and within the domains of graduate student, faculty, and administrative subcultures. Cultural barriers to graduate student unionization are important to understand regardless of whether one supports or does not support collective bargaining among graduate employees. The observable fact is that the academy faces a significant union movement among graduate students, and making sense of the organizational challenges associated with such processes is important for all involved in such processes.

This study has both practical and scholarly implications. Identifying barriers to graduate student unionization offers insight for better preparing and/or responding to unionization efforts. Given the limited research on this emergent phenomenon, the cultural barriers presented here are both timely and necessary. Our findings also demonstrate how unionization barriers may be understood as culturally embedded and woven

throughout subcultures within the larger organizational context. In this regard, an organizational culture approach provides both a functional and an insightful means to respond to the different levels and relationships within the complex culture of the research university. And although our study has centered on only one such university, there is ample evidence to suggest that research universities share significant cultural characteristics (Clark, 1987).

Given the present lack of scholarly inquiry centering on graduate student unionization, a promising stream of research is suggested here. The conceptual framework utilized in this study may prove helpful, but others may be developed as well. For example, the economic aspects of graduate student unionization are not addressed in this article, and yet such issues may present significant barriers to unionization. Also, the role of the disciplinary field in understanding graduate student unionization remains largely unexplored. Although our study interviewed members across multiple fields, we did not compare the findings from one field to another, given the already complex nature of this exploratory study. Future studies should consider the socialization process across disciplines as a major level of analysis (Becher, 1989; Clark, 1987; Smart, Feldman, & Ethington, 2001; Weidman, Twale, & Stein 2001). Finally, given that our study has explored a single research institution, similar approaches should be considered in comparing these findings to graduate student unionization efforts at other institutions.

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