



## Contingency and The Runaway Academic Apprentice: How Craft Union History Can Inform Attempts to Reverse the Decline of Faculty Tenure

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The rise of contingent or precarious contracts within academic markets is the latest manifestation of the regulatory failures that bedevil delicately balanced apprenticeship institutions.

Modern part-time academic journeymen and women who peddle their courseware across the academic malls of America share much with mid-to-late-nineteenth century artisans undercut by machine-age mass markets (Rorabaugh, 1984). Part-time faculty are fully 40 percent of the American Academic Workforce (AAUP, 2017), and leaving out graduate student employees the figure rises to over 46%. Off-tenure track full time instructors comprise another 17% (or 20% omitting graduate employees) of faculty. Additionally, 15% of the academic workforce is comprised of graduate student assistants who occupy a unique

place within the academic workforce.

Placing these contemporary aggravations into historical context provides insight on paths forward.

## **Regulating the Apprenticeship in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

After the courts' denial of graduate assistants' bargaining rights based upon their student status in 2004, analogies to apprenticeship lost favor among graduate activists. For writers like Watt (2002) and Bousquet (2009), graduate assistants are workers, and any presumption of harmonious apprenticeship relations must be rejected. However, my own research emphasizes that apprentice relations were contested in 19th century America (Jacoby, 1991, 1996).

Early US apprenticeship involved an employer-dominated indenture amenable to multiple abuses. Only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were craft unions able to successfully impose responsibilities on employers so as to provide job learners with rights and decent wages. These indentures were negotiated by crafts as a whole, and not by an apprentice's union.

Guild arrangements promoted an increasing independence as workers rose from apprentice to journeyman and then master. Nothing about this arrangement was automatic. Temptations by masters to cheat by exploiting cheap labor or for apprentices to run away before completing their indentures outline a long history of abuse (Rorabaugh, 1986, Jacoby, 1991). And yet, in normal times the system worked well enough to supply a new generation of craft workers whose investment in skill was stabilized by guilds or their successors, the craft unions.

It should be no surprise that the university arose as a guild designed to populate the learned professions, including the professoriate. The structural similarities between graduate school and apprenticeship are notable: both involve lengthy periods of study followed by tests of proficiency; investment costs made with the expectation of career progression; and indicators of quality assurance based upon a ratio of learners to mentors. Although collegiate investment costs are nominally covered through labor within apprenticeship, actual practice produces considerable overlaps.

The power of craft unions depended upon their management of the reproduction of "skill", a concept that is somewhat of an enigma within capitalism. If capitalism is presumed to rest upon an assertion of a boss's rights to manage their own property and direct the labor of

hired hands that use it, the question of skill and its control becomes central and contentious (Braverman, 1974; Montgomery, 1987). Modern economists comprehend the long-term investments in workers' human capital as critical to skill. Because their consent is required, these investments empower artisans. The economist Oliver Williamson (1975, 1985) explains that workers who possess rare (specific) skills paid for by their employers are in strong positions to holdup production and make counter demands. The "holdup" phenomenon is so fundamental that it is reasonable to understand guilds as an institution essential in securing cooperation between masters and pupils (Epstein, 2008).

Late 19th century workers sought to defend their crafts from new divisions of labor. Employers saw increasingly less need for the independent and all-round craft worker who had been the pride of apprenticeship programs. And technological and market upheavals prevented guilds and unions from *consistently* regulating uniform apprenticeships. Machines transformed industrial workplaces, and employers frequently preferred hiring inexpensive "greenhorns". Attempting to preserve the independence they had achieved through craft knowledge, workers and their unions battled for control of apprenticeship and schooling. The modern high school and vocational education sprouted over the 20 years straddling each side of 1900, leaving only a narrow crust of occupations wherein labor successfully negotiated apprenticeships. Those same craft unions persist today as stalwarts of the labor movement.

## **The Modern Capitalist Challenge to Faculty Tenure**

The autarkic nature of differentiated higher education institutions and their labor organizations make current struggles unsurprising. As was true for 19th century artisans, the academic market is ever more splintered.

When we analogize graduate school to an apprenticeship, what we see clearly is a profound disconnect and inability to enforce uniform apprentice terms as a condition for entry-level faculty positions at the vast majority of higher educational institutions. The "runaway academic apprentice" stands out as an emblem of this relative powerlessness.

The modern university was created as a site for the reproduction of academic skill. Most notably, the new Johns Hopkins provided a model for research universities, becoming the launching pad for modern disciplinary organizations. Especially within the social sciences, disciplines disconnected themselves from non-academic professional bodies (Haskell, 1977), focusing instead on scholarship, promoting an academic life that tacitly rejected principles of labor solidarity. The disciplinary prestige and authority conferred upon their master scholars produces a hierarchical culture. These cultures are first forged within PhD

programs, wherein acolytes study and produce research under leading researchers. A byproduct of this apprenticeship is the assumption that the well-rounded academic is a master of not just one aspect of their trade— instruction— but also of the ability to construct and deconstruct knowledge. However, the incentives to run away from the lengthy and costly commitment entailed by the PhD are high, especially when large segments of the academic markets prefer the less expensive instructional labor of academics.

Community colleges are where faculty systems without tenure gained their earliest and largest foothold in the United States. It is not unusual to find community colleges in which nearly all the faculty are part-time, though the percentage of part-time faculty is more typically between two-thirds and three quarters (Jacoby, 2006). David Laurence (2013) reports that fewer than 9% of non-tenure tenure track faculty had doctoral degrees in the last national study that was conducted in 2004. By contrast, the Schuster and Finkelstein show that among doctoral institutions, 85% of FT tenure track faculty possessed doctorates and even among non-tenure track faculty at those institutions half had PhDs (2006).

Practices developed by community colleges are now disseminating towards more prestigious institutions that are under pressure to find cost reductions. If nothing else, this model succeeds in undermining solidarity across a faculty divided by job status, degree attainment, and institutional prestige.

The fact is that employing institutions do not feel compelled to hire PhDs for an increasingly large swath of faculty. And, quite opposite Bousquet's assertion that the PhD is the "waste product" of the university— i.e. that graduate students are desired as cheap labor, so that the cost of the occasional degree completer constitutes a waste— it is only among universities that the preponderance of tenure track (and all) faculty are hired with a PhD. It is not an original idea to point out that there is a mismatch between licensure of graduate students through doctoral work and the demand for faculty in higher education.

## **The Need for Industry-Wide Regulation**

Can faculty unions today accomplish what craft unions did in the late 19th and early 20th centuries? While labor unions generally succeed in securing better wages and conditions among the classes of academics they represent including longer contracts and stronger academic integration into departments and faculty governance, so far they have been unable to redress the rise of contingency in any significant way. That is evidenced most clearly by the consistent loss of secure tenure track faculty positions. Although community colleges are the most unionized segment of higher education, they have the highest rates of contingency. The academic unions that focus narrowly on lecturers, part-time faculty and

graduate students are similarly ill-positioned to wage fights beyond their members' immediate bread and butter interests, which are typically at odds with traditional assumptions regarding academic apprenticeship.

The aim of this essay is not to blame any one type of institution or union, but rather to break the assumption that all types of unionization can address the situation equally well. Certainly, the most important advance in organizing comes in the form of the metro union drives in Boston, Washington DC, Philadelphia and Seattle. Such drives create the possibility that multi-employer unionization can level the playing field for contingent faculty.

However, it will take national coordination to effectively regulate entry and establish minimum conditions. My preference is to see unions organize the disciplinary associations as agents to raise and enforce minimum labor conditions in exchange for employer access to students at leading universities. For now, however, it is enough for us simply to rethink labor's role in assembling the pieces of the apprentice question into a more cohesive picture.

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