

CHAPTER 17

THE RHETORIC OF EXCELLENCE AND THE ERASURE OF GRADUATE LABOR

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Threads: Professionalizing and Developing in Complex Contexts;
Protecting Gains, Telling Cautionary Tales

In 2011, the University of Houston (UH) was ranked by the Carnegie Foundation as a “Very High Research Activity” university. Billboards went up across the city, banners were hung from every lamp post on campus, and every letterhead and email was changed to announce to the world that UH was “Houston’s Tier One University.” Becoming a “Tier One” university had been a key part of UH’s long term goal since the current president was hired in 2008, and UH is not the only large public university in Texas that has been concerned with such a push. Thanks to a push from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, Tier One status means greater funding potential from the state in addition to a higher caliber undergraduate student body and increased recognition both within and outside of Texas. UH, which had previously functioned more as a community-based university, could become known as on par with the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M, the only other two research universities designated “Very High Research Activity” in the state. To be known as “Tier One,” in other words, was both a *marker* of excellence and a *means* to achieving further excellence as an academic institution. Tier One status here functions as a brand which the university has claimed, monetized, and profited from. Since 2011, tuition has gone up along with the average high school GPAs and SAT scores of undergraduate students, and a new student center and stadium have been constructed to improve life on campus for undergraduate students.

The designation of “Very High Research University,” in other words, has been used to market the university as an undergraduate institution despite the fact that the Carnegie designation is based primarily on graduate degrees conferred and the research of professors who teach few (if any) undergraduate courses. It is also a designation that is not meant to be a measure of quality, but rather

only a way to group universities with similar student bodies. In this chapter, I'm primarily concerned with the way that the construction of the University of Houston as "excellent" —through the branding of Tier One based on this measure —functions to erase the work of graduate student workers, marking them as disposable in pursuit of a larger capitalist goal. This move happens within a system that already devalues the work of graduate students by falsely constructing them as apprentices who are the primary beneficiaries of their work in the academy. I'll begin by looking more closely at the rhetoric of excellence, especially as it has been adopted by the University of Houston, because the institutional narratives that define excellence are closely tied to labor conditions. In this case, graduate labor provides a huge part of the material conditions on which a public research university can build its image in order to claim excellence; however, the very presence of graduate student teachers as the face of lower division education undermines that narrative of excellence, especially where a university is concerned with "World Class Faculty" as a marketing strategy.

The language of excellence is one of the more insidious ways that neoliberal discourse circulates in the university, in part because it *appears* to be so ideologically neutral. In *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings shows that part of the reason for this is that excellence generally functions without a direct referent, such that "parking services and research grants can each be excellent, and their excellence is not dependent on any specific qualities or effects that they share" (Readings 22). Readings sees excellence as an "entirely meaningless" and "non-referential" descriptive term, which

effectively brackets all questions of reference or function, thus creating an internal market. Henceforth, the question of the University is only the question of relative value-for-money, the question posed to a student who is situated entirely as a *consumer*. (22; 27, emphasis in original)

When excellence works as a key way of valuing the university, it makes a university education—and college degrees—function more like any other commodity. Although Readings believes that excellence is an empty term and therefore non-ideological, he does acknowledge the way that its emptiness functions to draw people in, bringing members of the academic community at all levels—even those who would normally eschew capitalist language and goals—to use a discourse that connects the university to a consumption model. He writes that the "need for excellence is what we all agree on. And we all agree upon it because it is not an ideology, in the sense that it has no external referent or internal content" (23). Excellence is therefore a marker that is hard to turn away from because there is no direct content to critique, and it becomes one of the ways that

academic capitalism spreads not just in the corporate world or in the university administration, but in the behaviors of faculty and students.

While Readings suggests that excellence is an easy idea for both the academy and the corporate world to agree on in part because of its ideological emptiness, Christopher Carter asserts in *The Rhetoric of Resistance* that this analysis ignores a key part of the way that excellence works. Although Carter does agree that excellence operates without solid referents—it is applied across many different fields and used to judge disparate ideas—he adds that even when it seems empty of content, it operates “within the boundaries of market rationality; and what’s more, it helps to preserve those boundaries while feigning no relation to them” (31). Because of this emptiness and the almost universally positive understanding of the term, excellence actually works to hide the connections to practices that are concerned only with competition, allowing academic programs that have embraced market logic to paint themselves as student-centered. This erasure is part of how excellence functions as what Carter calls “a seedbed of ideology,” working like Weaver’s God terms to rhetorically “constitute and reconstitute an ideology that binds higher education to global capital” (31). Carter thus begins to move towards defining the rhetorical work of excellence as working to establish and spread ideology.

Bill Readings points to the use of rankings such as that done by *Maclean’s* in Canada and the *US News & World Report* in the US as one of the problematic ways that universities try to demonstrate excellence. Such reports offer evaluations that function like *Consumer Reports*, offering data to compare schools as one might compare any similar product for consumption. There has even been an increase in the past few years of language suggesting that one should find the best *value* in an educational institution. The problem, though, comes when universities use these ideas in order to develop and change their programs. They take an external evaluation—one which is already steeped in the language of consumption, such that a student is choosing which university to attend in the same way she might choose to buy a car—and use it as an internal measure of excellence. As university administrators, professors, staff, and students cater to these rankings, they are buying into the idea of excellence as it is linked to a profit-oriented model of consumption.

Certainly part of the overall “Tier One push” at the University of Houston, and in the state of Texas as a whole, has been a process of wanting more national recognition on such lists, but the use of the Carnegie Foundation listing as a measure of excellence works somewhat differently. The Carnegie Foundation designation is, for the purposes of measuring real quality, an empty designation outside of grouping institutions for further comparison, but it is because of this emptiness that it can stand in so easily for the branding that the UH admin-

istration wants to do. Here, as Carter and Readings suggest, excellence has no referent; the measure to which administrators point is a meaningless one. But the way that the university has used the Carnegie designation as a measure of excellence is nonetheless instructive in looking at the way that certain kinds of labor—in this analysis, specifically graduate labor—are erased in constructing these institutional narratives.

Since branding itself as a Tier One University, the University of Houston, has marketed itself to bring in first-time-in-college undergraduate students with higher GPAs and SAT scores, and pushing those with more mediocre numbers into the undergraduate programs in other campuses across the university system—ones that are not identified as Tier One—or to the many community college campuses nearby. From 2007 to 2013—the period immediately before the Tier One Push until the most recently collected institutional data available—the number of first-time-in-college freshman applicants to the University of Houston increased from 10,978 (with a 77 percent acceptance rate) to 17,407 (with a 58 percent acceptance rate). In addition, for those same years, freshmen in the top ten percent of their high school classes increased from 20 to 34 percent, while the students scoring above a 600 on the verbal portion of the SAT increased from 16 to 29 percent (University of Houston IR). The increase in applicants and selectivity coincides with UH's Tier One marketing campaign, which functions both as a signifier of the University's excellence *and* a means by which the university is making itself more excellent. In these same years, we've seen massive construction projects focused primarily on a new student union center and a new stadium, with both locations functioning much more like mini-malls. These changes speak to the consumerist lifestyles of undergraduate student populations and speak towards the way "Very High Research Activity" slips towards "Tier One Research" slips towards "Tier One undergraduate" institution.

But the university, in promotional materials highlighting the importance of being a Tier One Research University, is also sure to declare that the "Tier One Push" isn't over, and that UH is still concerned with "broadening our overall excellence" (University of Houston, "Tier One"). The "overall excellence" in need of broadening refers to the fact that although the Tier One brand has been used as a recruiting tool for undergraduates, the university is still lacking in many metrics that would typically define an "excellent" undergraduate institution, particularly because UH has a six year graduation rate of below 50 percent. The relative success of UH's marketing campaign—which ignores low graduation rates in emphasizing a "Tier One education"—demonstrates the slipperiness of the language of excellence. Even when it has nothing to do with undergraduate programs, a brand that is associated with excellence comes to stand for the kind of undergraduate experience that draws larger numbers of applicants with high-

er high school GPAs and standardized test scores. The changes at the University of Houston are operating like a self-fulfilling prophecy, improving metrics usually associated with undergraduate educational quality—average high school GPA, test scores, students living on campus, and selectivity in admissions—by changing the student body instead of the programs. The university can expect improvements in retention and graduation rates because they are able to select students who are more likely to persist, more likely to graduate in three years, and come from family backgrounds that enable them to pay for on-campus housing.

The fact that the discourse of excellence functions to erase connections to market logic, as Christopher Carter suggests, is important for the analysis of the University of Houston's use of Tier One as a brand. Part of the way that the Tier One discourse operates is to forward the parts of a "Very High Research Institution" that might be good for students—for example, the presence of world renowned research faculty, which has been heavily advertised on UH promotional material. However, we all know that when research is emphasized as the primary goal for faculty, teaching is treated with reduced importance, particularly in the case of introductory and freshman classes, which are more likely to be taught by graduate and contingent faculty. It is only logical that increasing the research output of the faculty implies not only the research of professors, but the teaching labor of graduate students who subsidize such research while also earning the advanced degrees that are measured to determine the Carnegie Foundation designation. "World Class Faculty" becomes one of the selling points implied by "Very High Research Activity" status, but it ignores the material reality that such faculty members rarely have anything to do with undergraduate education, especially lower division courses, at large public universities. Instead, the labor of teaching undergraduates falls to graduate students, whose teaching labor is erased within this narrative.

Such labor is generally justified as being part of the education of graduate students, as part of an apprenticeship in the academy, which already serves to devalue much of the labor of graduate students within the institutional narrative. Kevin Mattson clarifies the progress of an apprenticeship historically in his essay "How I Became a Worker," which describes the ideal system in which one "proceeded from apprentice (graduate student) to journeyman (teaching assistant) to master artisan (professor)" (90). The system, in this ideal form, works to train and then place individuals into top jobs, serving the best interests of all parties. We know, though, that the system in the academy is not operating in its ideal form. My concern is that clinging to the language of apprenticeship is harmful when the system no longer works as described, and certainly not in the best interest of all parties. When it prevents new thinking about a broken system

and silences dissent for exploitative labor situations, maintaining the language of the apprenticeship model is directly implicated in the larger problems of the labor system.

As an example, Mattson points to the historical situation in nineteenth century New York, where the labor system become more and more exploitative. Journeymen were closed out of master artisan jobs, instead finding that their “‘training’ became longer and longer stints of employment and hourly wages,” leaving them with little option but to “sell their labor to master craftsmen who looked increasingly like small factory owners” (90). In this situation, clinging to the language of the apprenticeship model served the best interests of the shrinking class of master artisans, who could fight against unionization and workers’ rights under the guise of the value of an increasingly non-existent system. This is strikingly similar to the current situation of contingent faculty, to whom Mattson refers as permanent journeymen. Such a classification is important because it ties the more recognized labor problem in the academy—that of the growing number of contingent faculty and shrinking number of tenure-track jobs—back to the system that produces labor. In other words, the labor problem begins with the production of graduate degrees, which form the base of what Marc Bousquet refers to as the primary operation of the academic system: the “extraction of teaching labor from non-degreed persons, primarily graduate employees and former graduate employees now working as adjunct labor—as part-timers, full-time lecturers, postdocs, and so on” (86).

The point that I want to make here is that the labor of graduate students—in roles as students/scholars and as workers in the university—is *vital* to the ability of the university to brand and market itself as Tier One. But the material reality of graduate students in these positions is hidden under the branding of the “Tier One University” and the narrative of apprenticeship. The story of building the university brand of excellence that I see is very different from the common institutional narratives of graduate education, in which graduate students are *students* first and teaching fellowships are support offered by a generous university. But when we know that graduate students are a vital part of the university machine and a fairly steady 20 percent of the academic labor force since at least 2003 (Curtis and Thornton 7), we have to acknowledge that the narrative is wrong. And the narrative we hold to—that of the graduate student as an apprentice who is learning a trade—helps create the conditions which erase the work of graduate students and make it that much harder to change the system. Nowhere is this tension more obvious than in English departments, where four year universities have graduate students teaching the labor-intensive first year writing (FYW) course while minimizing both the presence of the course and the work of the graduate students. We see this particularly in James Slevin’s observation

that even though FYW courses make up around 70 percent of undergraduate courses offered, those courses appear as two or three entries in the course catalogue, where they are taught by “STAFF” rather than a named individual (Slevin 5). At large research universities, FYW courses are generally taught by graduate students, whose names are absent from the course history of the university.

When the Wyoming Resolution was taken up in the 1989 CCCCs “Statement on Principles and Standards,” graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) were clearly defined as “primarily students” within the document. Although I take this to be an attempt at protecting graduate students, it unfortunately functions more as a means of sweeping aside the labor of graduate students, as though declaring that the 1/1 or 2/2 courseload suggested for GTAs *should not be* the primary source of labor for the teaching of FYW somehow makes it so. In a department like that at UH, though, with around seventy GTAs, each teaching one or two classes per semester (depending on semester progress of her program), graduate labor *is* the labor foundation of the department. Only three or four tenured faculty per semester volunteer to teach a section of FYW, and any other leftover sections are taught by contingent instructors. Most tenured faculty at large research universities, meanwhile, teach primarily graduate and upper division courses in their field areas, while rarely (most likely never) teaching any introductory freshman course.

Because we know that only about 7 percent of introductory undergraduate courses in English were taught by tenure-track faculty as of the 1999 CAW-CCCC study of contingent faculty (Scott 153), claiming the work of teaching FYW as part of an apprenticeship is problematic because it is clearly *not* an education in doing the work of a tenured faculty member. Instead, an education that includes teaching a 2/2 load of FYW with minimal training, no private office space to consult with students, a low salary, little chance of shared governance, little representation on department committees, and few benefits sounds like an apprenticeship towards a contingent faculty position. Or, more to the point, like a contingent faculty position. In this case, the label of “apprenticeship” ignores the reality: GTAs being treated like contingent faculty in a system where tenure-track lines are decreasing while contingent jobs become more common. The use of the apprenticeship model of graduate education is therefore operating as part of the system while erasing the material realities of graduate student labor in order to cover over that reality.

The “Tier One push” at the University of Houston offers a specific example of the way that the rhetoric of excellence and the rhetoric of apprenticeship work together to erase both the immediate work of graduate students *and* the reality of the larger labor system. It’s only by examining these rhetorics that we have a chance to name the system in which we find ourselves and thereby to create the

possibility for unified collective action.

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