

Ideology and Rhetoric of Undergraduate Student Workers in Academic Libraries

by Elliott Kuecker

Many library and information science (LIS) scholars do the commendable and useful work of identifying practical problems, and describing solutions, to improve undergraduate labor in academic libraries, but rarely has the field looked at the ideological problems surrounding this type of labor. Scholarship on student workers in academic libraries reveals a concern for the wellbeing of the students, and a desire to create the best possible work environment for all staff, but these goals can be better met by focusing not only on practical matters and individual libraries as small workplaces, but on the broader ideology of work in academia in general, student labor in general, and academic libraries specifically. Labor studies has long been concerned with ideology because it is how hegemony functions in writing and reproducing the commonplace rhetoric that allows inequitable systems of power to stay in place. I argue that rather than looking at new ways to train students in hopes of resolving problems with student labor, we must understand the rhetoric in the LIS field surrounding student workers, and how this rhetoric aids the hegemony of the academic institution, the labor market that affects academic libraries. I do this by presenting the common traits of the dominant rhetoric on student labor in LIS literature, discussing what ideological problems we can learn from scholarship outside of the field (labor studies and critical university studies), discussing the student activist perspective on student labor, and finally introducing counter rhetorics from which we should learn and borrow.

The abstract concepts of rhetoric, ideology, and hegemony must be considered, as “The central goal of critical theory in organizational studies has been to create societies and work places which are free from domination, where all members have an equal opportunity to contribute to the production of systems that meet human needs and lead to the progressive development of all.”¹ Understanding our own rhetoric will allow for us to make shifts

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in it, hopefully undermining the hegemonic system that “works through pervading common sense and becoming part of the ordinary way of seeing the world, understanding one’s self and experience needs.”²

So much of what we do in libraries is for the service, education, and support of all people we encounter, but sometimes we look outward at our patrons and not inward at our staff. As Benjamin Johnson, Patrick Kavanagh, and Kevin Mattson critiqued when they introduced their *Steal This University*, a text covering labor issues in academia: “Worse yet, sometimes it leads middle-class people to forget the injustices that exist right in front of their noses. Confronting practices closer to home is often harder than protesting across the globe.”³

Rhetoric of Student Workers in LIS Scholarship

Library services and demand has not waned, and in some cases has increased, but contingent labor – temporary workers who usually work part-time, without benefits – performs too much of the work. Many LIS articles on student labor in libraries published in the last 15 years begin with acknowledgments of how important student labor is to keeping the doors open, or how “changing roles of librarians” has led to a greater need for student labor, showing that as a field we all understand our great reliance on undergraduate labor. Scholars then seek to solve these problems through innovative training techniques, ways to introduce new responsibilities for student workers, and ways to expand the value of part-time work in academic libraries for student workers.

The many examples of the common rhetoric in LIS management literature about the essential nature of student workers in keeping libraries running prove that this is a universal issue, and that we talk about this issue in a specific way. Vera J. Lux and Linda Rich write,

Talk abounds in the academic library realm about the shifting roles of librarians. While it was once an accepted norm that an academic library should have a professional librarian staffing a reference service point, reference librarians now often find themselves needing to justify time spent at the reference desk.⁴

Lux and Rich go on to explore the quality of reference transactions students provide in their expanded duties as reference representative, a task historically left to professional librarians. Jamie Seeholzer writes, patrons come forth with requests for more services, but

with tight budgets and limited staff, how can academic libraries listen and respond to these concerns? By enlisting the help of reliable students, academic libraries can not only determine the concerns and wishes of library patrons...and do so with minimal investment of librarian resources, time, or money.⁵

Seeholzer increases the meaningfulness of work for undergraduates by giving them tutoring assignments during certain library hours. Pamela N. Martin and Britt Fagerheim write, “As libraries continue to rely heavily on student workforce, librarians need to empower students to be successful employees in the library and assess both their knowledge and tools we provide them.”⁶ Their students take on IT responsibilities as a form of empowerment. In all of these cases, and the many others, well-intentioned library managers are trying to make the best of the labor situation in their libraries, but the acknowledgement of a reliance on student labor is met with an attempt to fix the problem by assigning more tasks or more complex tasks, rather than resist or rewrite the system.

The dominant rhetoric we work with as a field, then, suggests that librarians do not have the time to do all the work assigned to them because of new job duties, and that students actually get something out of these increased responsibilities in the form of intangible value. In Martin and Fagerheim’s example above, they feel that this empowers students. In other examples, students get something out of it because they are learning. Campbell-Meier and Hussey even suggest formalizing learning outcomes to student workers, both graduate and undergraduate.⁷ And Jamie P. Kohler, recognizing that “students are no longer simply fit for routine tasks and manual labor,”⁸ suggests that trainings be moved to a distance learning format,⁹ as does Laura Manley and Robert P. Holley, who suggest using Blackboard.¹⁰ Evanson promotes the idea of individual projects that come with a proposal, goals, and a timeline.¹¹ She writes that the new training model “has sparked in our students the opportunities it has created for transferrable learning. The development of training activities designed around our learning outcomes has enabled us to focus on the ‘student’ as a well as the ‘employee’ role.”¹² These notions are more similar to classrooms and curriculum than they are to work, showing that the ideology of student labor justifies the extra work by positing that we are paying students fairly in intangible value (education), even though, and especially because, we are not paying them fairly in the form of wages.

The idea that payment for work can come in the form of education rather than a fair wage is common, and is integral to the justification for Federal Work Study (FWS), the route many students take to academic library student jobs. FWS is meant to pay students a small wage (often on par with minimum wage in a state), and the intangible value of career-related education. Adela Soliz and Bridget Terry Long write, “Unlike the Pell Grant, which is awarded directly to students, FWS funds are allocated as a lump sum to institutions, which then have some discretion as to how to distribute the funds to students.”¹³ The institution pays part of the wage and the government contributes 20% to 50% of the rest. The major problem with this, other than the fact that it is financial aid in the form of a low-paying job, is that it does not live up to its intentions. Formed in 1964 as part of the Economic Opportunity Act to aid low-income students, “the placements are supposed to be both career-focused and scheduled to not interfere with academics.”¹⁴ Elizabeth Kenefick writes that “less than

40 percent of recipients indicated having a placement that complemented his or her academic problem.”¹⁵ Since institutions have to pay part of the wages, students must be placed where they are needed, and since it would be a difficult task to link every student to an appropriate match, either on or off campus, FWS becomes a broken promise for students who wanted to justify the low-wage with relevant experience. Many FWS do end up in our academic libraries, and while many strive to give students transferrable skills to legitimize the library job more, a double-edge sword is revealed when we ask for more responsibility from students who are not adequately compensated for such responsibility.

Making the experience for a student worker valuable with transferrable skills is a time-consuming task for full-time library managers, which serves as another piece of evidence toward the repercussions of hegemony within the institutional labor system, though it is all in an effort to transform the student workers experience into something that appears more fair. The result is simply that we all are working more for the same pay. Bella Karr Gerlich posits that the cost of student employees is not worth their contributions, or lack of contributions, as they typically have “poor attendance records and ambivalent attitudes toward their work.”¹⁶ She writes, “I realized that our efforts on behalf of student employees had far exceeded the results that student employees contributed to the organization”¹⁷ and pushes for core workers (full-time, invested staff) instead of contingent employees (students who do not return nor have reasons to invest).

Gerlich does not address the issues from a critique of hegemony and has different motivations in her writing, but she contributes to how we can see contingent labor as a systemic problem that effects libraries in big ways, and she seeks alternatives. She also addresses our expectations for students: “how can we as managers expect a working class that is so talented to choose to do such repetitive and mundane tasks as shelving, processing, or circulation books for so little a financial reward”¹⁸ and further, “Is it any surprise then that today’s student employee is quickly bored with the low-tech, linear-thinking, rule-bound, hierarchical library job?”¹⁹

Student Perspectives on their Work

Not only are library professionals unsatisfied with the labor circumstances surrounding undergraduates, student employees are as well. In June 2017, University of Chicago student library employees voted to join Teamsters Local 743, an unusual event among library student employees and private university undergraduate student workers generally. Ally Marotti reports, “The Teamsters plan to negotiate with the university for a contract that deals with issues such as employee wages and stable hours.”²⁰ One student worker explains,

Young people from my generation are demanding that our voices be heard, and unionization is an important part of our movement. Our election sets a precedent for student workers across the country; they

can demand a seat at the bargaining table and make their universities more equitable and accessible.²¹

Though the Chicago union example is exceptional and rare, other students are likely to have bargained with the university in an abstract way: to accept low-pay, low-status work as a temporary condition in exchange for freedom in the future, and, possibly for some, undergraduate work is also a type of badge of honor one puts up with in their student years. Student employees may be unmotivated because of the lack of financial reward (as Gerlich wrote), but then why do we do not hear of many labor unions forming from undergraduate student workers? Marc Bousquet describes the way all student workers think of their work, saying, “They see manual work and service work through the lens of their own past, through their own sense of their past selves as students, likely comprising all of the feelings the non-adult, of the temporary, of the mobile, of the single person.”²² In his view, student labor as a past experience is an affect the student worker employs during and after this period as a way to understand why they did low-paying, dull work for a few years. He writes, “The universities’ role in this bargain is crucial: it provides the promise of escaping into the future... give us, our vendors, and our employing partners what we want (tuition, fees, and a fair chunk of labor time over several years), and you can escape the life you’re living now.”²³

Self-awareness on the part of student workers is further evidenced in studies done in libraries on undergraduate labor. A survey conducted by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Southern Illinois University-Carbondale (2010) questioned “what behaviors, opportunities, and experiences encouraged”²⁴ student workers to continue working in the library field. They write, “Other participants were challenged by tedious shelving and being treated like ‘second class citizens’... Faculty library users sometimes treated the students ‘like peons.’”²⁵ These results are interesting because they describe how students perceive themselves in their roles, and they used the language that suggest someone with inferior rights (second class citizens) and someone who is a day laborer (a peon). Further, the authors write that they did not anticipate the following results:

none of the focus groups reported being mentored, and there was no significant in-house guidance about career options as student workers... some reported that they had been discouraged from library work due to a variety of reasons, low pay being a main problem. Poor salaries are an issue the profession continues to battle.²⁶

In this case the student employees uniformly report that they receive no guidance, and that in fact, while they are at work, full-time staff actively discourage further interest in the field because of the disproportionate labor-to-pay exchange that happens across the field. In this way, the library itself contributes to the hegemonic labor system, perhaps because even the full-time staff feel exploited themselves. So while the library may not be the origin of the problem, it is not countering it.

A study conducted at Rutgers University Libraries (2014) approaches the topic of student labor operating under the assumption that, of course, students feel unappreciated in this labor system, and seeks to understand how to improve this rather than even prove that it is happening, as this notion should be a commonplace by this point. The information gathered in this survey can be used to “further integrate the students into the library’s organizational identity”²⁷ and generally acknowledge the importance of their place in the library. The authors write that RUL has relied on and mentored student workers for a long time, yet still the “core” of the library is thought to be the professional librarians and staff. They saw this in how services, resources, programs, and so forth, are developed. They write, “This perception can leave student employees disengaged or unwilling to commit to library work beyond the minimum requirements. Librarians and staff may also fail to recognize their skills and potential as library ambassadors.”²⁸ The language the RUL authors use is appropriate to this discussion, as they address the institutional ideology about student workers and suggest that lack of credit and acknowledgement these workers receive obviously results in lower quality work, rather than blaming the students themselves for lack of motivation. This again shows how the library itself is not the origin of the problem, but contributes to the hegemonic labor system, rather than countering it. Further, the survey is testing for the rankings on meaningfulness of intangible values, as the authors already know that the workplace culture has disadvantages for students, and the wages are irrelevant to students who simply need any job at all. In fact, 76% listed that a paycheck is their reason for working at the library, followed by a long list of intangible values that might be earned while working in the library such as a good atmosphere, likeable coworkers, customer service skills, communication skills, and etc.²⁹

Counter Rhetorics to the Hegemony

The line of rhetoric we see dominating LIS literature on undergraduate labor has been problematic in student labor in general, especially graduate assistant labor, though these discussions have not been part of the LIS conversations about labor. Marc Bousquet writes about the “casualization of academic work,” saying, “In this frame, the designation ‘student,’ including undergraduate and even child labor, emerges as a bonanza in global capital’s voracious quest for low-cost, underregulated labor.”³⁰ Gordon Lefer describes it saying, “Universities have organized production along lines that rely on a continuing supply of cheap, just-in-time labor, continually refreshed with new recruits.”³¹ One part of what many call the Academic Industrial Complex is imposing contingent labor on departments to replace what were once full-time-employee jobs. Like Gerlich argued, we know that contingent workers are less productive because the fast turnover requires frequent training and that they are less invested in something temporary, but the bigger picture is that productivity is really the least of our worries. Ethically we are dealing with a situation in which jobs originally afforded to full-time staff are being given to student workers because they can be abused: low wages and no benefits, few complaints

because the situation is temporary, and a constantly maintained ideology that they are getting an education on the side.

The Chicago library student employee example may be surprising for us to read about in the library field, but graduate student workers have been forming unions for several decades to combat labor exploitation. Facing low wages, little or no benefits, and teaching multiple classes a semester, they form unions to negotiate percentage increases in stipends, childcare subsidies, health insurance, protections against sexual harassment, and etc. State university students are also more likely to unionize, with famously successful ones being University of Michigan, University of Florida, and University of California, among others. In 2001, NYU graduate students became the first collective of students to form a union,³² though many have followed. In the case of the student library workers in Chicago, this would be a victory for a private school, in addition to a victory for undergraduates. The labor circumstances that lead graduate students to forming unions are similar to the labor circumstances happening in libraries because the duties that once befell full-time staff are being moved to contingent employees (often because full-time staff are being asked to do something else instead), and there is more contingent labor available than full-time staff (often because of budget).

The justification for having graduate students work in the place of instructors is very similar to how the LIS field, and the Academic Industrial Complex, justifies undergraduate student labor, suggesting that they are learning something as an intangible value that can take the place of wages. Further, the LIS field contributes to this rhetoric by solving the problem with more work or more complex work, but importantly, scholars who address graduate student labor already see through this justification, as it simply doesn't work. Problems with graduate student labor largely revolve around the fact that demand for instructors at universities has not waned, and in most cases has increased in recent years, and yet graduate students teach classes that full-time professors could be teaching because (1) "graduate teacher's salaries are so meager," and (2) "graduate students have a unique status as faculty-in-training, so all their teaching and research work is really part of their education, and therefore should not be considered 'employment.'"³³ But for all of this teaching and experience, the graduate students are paid in poverty-level stipends and graduate only to see that their experience has not always served them in earning a fulltime job, as Lafer and Bousquet both argue that a PhD is essentially the beginning of an end to an academic career.³⁴ In other words, they often never achieve the career that all this intangible value was supposed to train them for, as the academic job market is oversaturated and exceptionally competitive. We might limit our justification of such labor in light of what we know about graduate students.

Though the dominant ideology currently dictates that working while in school is a normal, commendable activity, there are other ways to look at this circumstance and see it in the light of capitalism run amuck. Students,

when acting only as students, are already workers, and not only that, they are impoverished workers. Understanding this notion is an essential ideological shift we must make in combating hegemony. In 1975 a group of student activists associated with Zerowork put it well when they authored a pamphlet called “Wages for Students.” They write, “Going to school, being a student is work. This work is called schoolwork although it is not usually considered to really be work since we don’t receive any wages for doing it... they have taught us to believe that only if you are paid do you really work.”³⁵ They go on to write, “We are forced to survive on what others wouldn’t tolerate. The housing we can afford to rent is substandard and overcrowded. The food we eat, must eat, is cheap institutional food of the cheapest brands... We are a clear case of poverty.”³⁶ In a system in which we are trained to believe that education is a privilege and luxury, not a right, rarely do we hear students identifying themselves as impoverished or that they are living substandard lives, but their argument is semantically watertight: “work” is in the word “schoolwork” for a reason, but this work is unpaid and rarely critically assessed. Work is already being conducted, so a student with no job is a working student. A student with a job outside of schoolwork has an additional job. Gus Tyler writes, in discussing labor organization from a union approach, “Whatever the outcome, the basic philosophy of organized labor is that wages and salaries are in exchange for work done and that there ought to be some ‘fair’ relationship between input and income—however sloppily the system operates.”³⁷ As laborers, the amount of effort put into a job should match the fruits reaped for the work. Similarly, Bousquet writes, “the transformative agency of the millions of student employees is evident in the anti-sweatshop movement and in graduate-employee union movements, which have allied themselves with other insecure workers and not with the tenured faculty.”³⁸ Like the Chicago library student employee example who voted to join the Teamsters, student employees have more in common with who we commonly associate with institutionally uneducated, low-wage workers, than they do the faculty in their classrooms, or perhaps even the upper administration in the library.

In being mindful of the fact that students who work in our libraries already have the job of students, we must move away from the notion of “unmotivated” students as character judgment, as this notion of intrinsic work ethic is a capitalist construction. Most likely people think that students should want to do good work because it is the right behavior and attitude to have. This is not addressing the fact that while that may be the dominant ideology of industrial capitalism, it is not the only ideology. The concept of “work ethic,” for example, is problematic as it is not a core human trait, but rather a belief system promoted by Calvinism in the West and, as many Marxists and labor studies scholars would suggest, a construction made to aid discipline in factories.³⁹ Edmund F. Byrne explains, “Marx himself rejected the duty-based work ethic as a device of capitalist exploitation of the working class.”⁴⁰ A love of one’s work, or desire to do good work is not what is generally being admonished. In fact, many anarchists and Marxists strongly believe in craft pride.⁴¹ Instead, it is the constant and compulsory work, no matter the pay and treatment, that is identified as the

problem, and the way in which this permeates our lives so much that we don't even know there might be other options. Bernard Marszalek writes, "The faint rumblings of discontent with the stresses of American life, in the most part due to the compulsive adherence to the work ethic, have still to cohere into a recognizable opposition."⁴² Consider if student workers, earning poverty wages, should be expected to have conform to the tools of discipline of capitalism simply because we as librarians have also been given too much work.

Additionally, if we ask students to sit at the circulation desk and perform user service tasks, or if we ask them to conduct reference transactions, a task we deem as more complex, they are still going to be paid the same wage. We cannot replace wages earned with intangible value, such as education opportunities, and so forth, when students may have not understood that was part of the deal when they agreed to take the job, or when they applied to Federal Work Study. Erik Olin Wright, in *Alternatives to Capitalism*, describes one of his axioms of participatory economics, writing,

The quality of work, not just the material rewards from the work, is an issue in justice... As an ideal, all jobs should be equally desirable from the point of view of whatever qualities people value within work.... People in jobs that, for pragmatic reasons, have more burdens in this sense (i.e. a less desirable balance of tasks) should thus be compensated with greater income or more leisure or in some other appropriate way.⁴⁴

When paying students more money is not within our power at our library, giving more tasks and more complex tasks cannot be the go-to solution, conflating solving the problem of dull work for students – or too much work for librarians – by making up educational outcomes that provide intangible value, we may consider doing the opposite, which is to provide more leisure time or give students an option of what type of work they do.

Problems that exist as part of industrial capitalism and the Academic Industrial Complex are not easily solved through practical measures. It is disappointing to write more text about problems and less text about solutions, but I see the current problem to be addressed as an abstract one grounded in how we think about student workers, and in the rhetoric we produce in our scholarship and conversations about student workers. Shifting our understandings of the power dynamics at play, and becoming aware of what more equitable labor systems might look or sound like, we can begin to introduce counter rhetoric to the dominant rhetoric, and hopefully begin to shift the dominant ideology within undergraduate student labor in libraries toward radical values that privilege ethics over productivity.

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