



May 25, 2017

Dear colleagues,

Last September, after the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that graduate students at private universities are employees who could form unions, I wrote you all, as PhD students in the Division. I include that letter below in the hope you can reread it, for here I can only summarize its two primary points. The first was that the Division of the Social Sciences' support of your studies during your five years in the GAI (roughly \$500,000 per PhD student) is neither motivated nor justified by any calculus about the "economic value" of your five points of pedagogical experience in the classroom (or for that matter, of any other collaborative activity you might undertake as part of your preparation to enter the academic profession, such as workshop coordinator or research assistant). And the second was that a union, insofar as it seeks to reduce our collaboration to precisely such an economic calculus, could have a negative effect on the shared values of thought and expression that are the foundation of teaching and research at a university like ours.

Now that the American Federation of Teachers and American Association of University Professors have filed a petition for union representation with the NLRB, I am reiterating my concern on both these points, and particularly the second. Indeed, I have good reason to worry that those values are already being compromised. On May 19, I was called to testify before the NLRB. Over some six hours of questioning from the University's and the union's lawyers as well as the NLRB's hearing officer, I responded from my particular perspective as Dean on the place of graduate students in the work of the Division. During that time, and within the rules of courtroom discourse, I attempted to explain the first point I made above: that the Division's support of your studies during your five years in the GAI must be understood not in terms of a labor market, but as an apprenticeship that is critical in your formation as teachers and scholars. I also expressed on various occasions during that testimony, as I did at the Laing Prize reception earlier this month, the profound esteem I have for the intellectual contributions of the graduate students with whom I have collaborated in research and teaching.

Some GSU colleagues attending the hearing were tweeting what purport to be real-time snippets of my testimony. One wrote "Dean: when working with grad student 'he was my student and also my teacher.' Who gets paid more?" (I had in fact called my student my teacher.) The same person later circulated an email stringing together purported statements in order to claim that I belittled all of your work, for example: "He described an RA who assisted him with a recent book and asserted that he would have finished his book more quickly without the RA seeking out articles and doing other research assistant labor." [NB, this is the same RA I had referred to as "my teacher."] The consequences of such misrepresentations are predictable. I have since received numerous e-mails criticizing my supposed views, and even seen one suggesting that graduate students should refuse to attend an upcoming scholarly panel on "Global Medievalisms," or any other in which I am participating, on the grounds of my "disparaging" comments as reported by the GSU. Are we henceforth going to boycott the work of colleagues with whom we imagine we disagree?

As a professor rather than a politician, I find myself surprised that anyone could perceive such tweets and subsequent emails as accurately capturing what I or anyone else in "#badmin" actually said or meant. Clearly, their goal is not to communicate my meaning, my experience, or my perspective, nor is it to help you make an informed decision. What their motivation is I cannot know. But I do know that such tactics, omnipresent though they may be in our national politics, are not conducive to the reasoned discourse that we have committed ourselves to as citizens of this university. They are an example of what I meant when I wrote in the September letter below that "the division of our community of discourse into two legally distinct categories of employees (students) and managers (faculty) could have a negative effect on the quality of that discourse."

We all see the major shifts taking place in higher education--including disinvestment in the humanities and social sciences, the erosion of tenure-track positions in favor of adjuncts, and the increasing commodification of teaching and research. My colleagues and I have worked hard against those tendencies. As I wrote in the note below, the ecology of values that nourishes critical thought, PhD study, and basic research in our disciplines is fragile and rare. Over the years, our community has been successful in collectively protecting our values against those tendencies. The careful and considered way in which it has done so has preserved the University of Chicago as the exceptional space of thought that attracted you and supports your work.

If and when an election is held, it will be your charge to decide how best to protect our ecosystem. Exercising that responsibility requires neither tweets nor dogma, but the application of our best values as humanists and social scientists: our ability to

think critically about complex problems, inform ourselves, test our prejudices, and cultivate a space in which a diversity of voices that might dissent from and challenge our own convictions can still be heard. Those values will lead you to diverse conclusions, which may very well not agree with mine. But whatever conclusion they lead you to, their very exercise will have preserved what is most important about a university.

With all best for the coming summer,

David

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September 6, 2016

Dear colleagues,

On August 23 the National Labor Relations Board ruled that graduate student assistants at private universities are employees who may form and join labor unions. In the wake of that decision I imagine indeed I hope that you will soon be discussing vigorously among yourselves the possible advantages and disadvantages of such a move here, and hearing from many people on the subject. I believe that the more perspectives you have available on this marvelously intricate institution that is our mutual home, the more informed your decisions about it may be. So I would also like to offer you my own: that of a former graduate student and now a professor whose task it has been, these last few years as your dean, to help coordinate our work together, to improve the conditions in which that collaboration takes place, and to secure the resources for it.

I do share the reservations expressed by Dean Rocky Kolb in his letter on this subject addressed to your colleagues in the Physical Sciences. Like him, I anticipate that entrusting significant aspects of our relationship to a third party designed for agency and advocacy in a very different world of work may erode the shared values, flexibility

of action, and freedom of thought and expression that are the foundation of teaching and research at a university like ours. I worry that the division of our community of discourse into two legally distinct categories of employees (students) and managers (faculty) could have a negative effect on the quality of that discourse. I know that there are state universities that have graduate student unions, but I also know that there are significant differences between graduate programs at state and private research universities, and that the state labor laws that govern public institutions are materially different from the federal law that would govern ours. Which is simply to say that there are many potential consequences to ponder as you choose your steps into the unknown.

I do have a more general concern. Since World War II millions of doctoral students have been afforded the extraordinary privilege previously available primarily to an aristocratic or clerical elite of engaging in the extended pursuit of profound questions while being supported or subsidized by their fellow citizens: philanthropists and taxpayers. Historically this represents an enormous expansion of opportunity to participate in the life of the mind. That expansion was made possible by a societal consensus that research in the humanities and social sciences was important, even if that importance could not be easily measured by the metrics the world of getting and spending, and that it therefore deserved a degree of insulation (not separation!) from those metrics.

This consensus created the faculties and fellowships that gave me and are giving you the resources to dedicate ourselves to the actualization of our own intellectual projects, projects that no other labor market would support. This privileged insulation from the most pressing demands of immediate return, this special university time of mind that allowed me to orient my attention toward the deep problems and distant horizons that most interested me (and even paid me to do so, without demanding ownership of my discoveries in return!), was an important reason why I (and perhaps also you) left work in sectors of the world with more sharply defined and often shorter term measures of labor value, and turned to doctoral study. As I see it, one of my most important responsibilities as Dean is to maintain the special conditions that make this exceptional space of thought possible. Hence I am suspicious of any process that threatens to commodify our work or reduce it to crude metrics or simplifications of value, as I suspect unionization would do.

Of course we all realize that the material conditions of your work are important, and strive constantly to improve those conditions. Over the past decade (and despite the Great Recession) the University has vastly increased its support of doctoral education. In the three years of my deanship alone (thanks in part to millions of dollars of private philanthropy) the Division of the Social Sciences has increased stipend and insurance

support (not including teaching) 32%, to \$16.6 million per year. This vast commitment of resources to you is not justified by the sort of market calculus about the value of your work that a union is likely to employ, nor is it motivated by the value of the pedagogical training you are asked to undertake during the five years of your fellowship. It is only motivated and justified by a shared sense of the immense albeit difficult to measure benefits that will accrue to you and to society if you are given the opportunity and skills to orient your attention to the most profound problems and communicate your discoveries to the world. That is our organizing conviction and highest value, and I am not optimistic that it is one any union can or will share.

Major shifts are taking place in higher education, including disinvestment in the humanities and social sciences, the erosion of tenure track positions in favor of adjuncts, and the increasing commodification of teaching and research. Over the years our community has been very successful in collectively protecting its values against those tendencies. The careful and considered way in which it has done so has preserved the University of Chicago as the exceptional space of thought that attracted you and supports your work. It is because we are all partners in this task of preservation that I presume to offer you my perspective. As you assume your share of responsibility for its preservation, I would only remind you of the obvious: the ecology of values that nourishes our research is increasingly rare. It deserves your protection and care.

If your department is included in a petition for union representation the outcome of any election that takes place will be binding on you and future graduate students, whether or not you vote: a further reason why it is important that your conversation about these issues be as thorough and informed as possible, and that should the occasion arise you exercise your vote. We all staff, students, and faculty look forward to your discussion of these issues, and are eager to further it in any way we can.

With all best for the coming year,

David

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