



[Back to Volume Two Contents](#)

Graduate Student Academic Freedom and the Apprenticeship Myth

By Dan Colson

In fall 2009, my university's newly hired director of programs in professional writing circulated a survey asking business writing instructors to note which of the long list of tasks, skills, and assignments they taught in their classes. Many of us blithely responded to the survey: what harm could come from his desire to know the overlaps and discontinuities amongst the program's instructors, many of whom had been teaching these courses for years? By early spring 2010, we learned that he was not simply gathering information. He announced that he "likely [would] define the *core content*" of the two major business writing courses, a move that would impose "an instructional core ... of ten weeks." The survey apparently had been either our only major opportunity to help shape this core or flimsy evidence to justify changes the new director already had planned. His e-mail did assure us that "the program is not proposing or adopting a single pedagogy for all sections"; he merely was dictating 70 percent of what we would teach.

A minor uproar tabled these changes for several months, but in November 2010, he outlined

the far-reaching details of this “core content”: his “proposal” covered “genre” (a list of required tasks—including e-mail, cover letters, and résumés—and excluded assignments); “skills” (a broad category encompassing everything from “self-assessment” to “visual design”); and “foundational concepts” (which contradict his claim for pedagogical flexibility by listing a set of four underlying principles that each class must build from, even though it is obvious that these “foundations” are the subjects of reasonable disagreements amongst both business writers and pedagogy scholars).

I do not dispute the pedagogical validity of the director’s genres, skills, and concepts. They seem an appropriate framework to structure a business writing course. Nor, though I find the opacity of the decision-making process inappropriate, do I wish to focus on *how* the director developed his personal vision for dozens of instructors’ classes. Instead, I want to highlight a comment he made to me in our one-on-one meeting to discuss his then-nascent proposal, a statement that explains not the content or process of the changes, but the attitude that would allow a single faculty-administrator to suggest sweeping pedagogical restrictions and, quite likely, to do so with no substantial resistance. While I defended the quality of our teachers’ instruction and insisted that no broad changes were needed, the director targeted our status as graduate students. As fledgling instructors, we have much to learn from him (though I likely have taught the course more often than he has). In fact, he angrily asked, “Isn’t that why you came [to this university]?” I quickly noted that no, I was not seeking a PhD in American literature so that I might learn to teach business writing. The absurdity of his position might be funny if it weren’t indicative of what I argue is one of the greatest threats to graduate student academic freedom: the apprenticeship myth.

The AAUP’s long history of supporting academic freedom has for the last decade been supplemented by increased attention to the unique role of graduate students in the academy, but the intersections of the two are not well detailed. The *Statement on Graduate Students* indicates that they “do have the right to academic freedom,” but that this “freedom ... is qualified by their still being learners in the profession.” *RIR* 14 (part of the *Recommended*

Institutional Regulations on Academic Freedom and Tenure) goes farther by asserting graduate student rights alongside the faculty's procedural rights and by suggesting policies that prohibit the restraint of "graduate student employees in their exercise of academic freedom." Neither document, however, details the extent to which graduate students possess academic freedom in their teaching. The AAUP strongly supports graduate students' right to the proto-professional exercise of academic freedom at the core of our education, but our teaching—simultaneously a learning experience and compensated labor—is not overtly addressed. Thus, the freedom we enjoy as instructional employees of the university is unclear: the work that allows us to strive toward disciplinary expertise and its concomitant professional rights takes place in a particularly murky space.

This gap allows for the first fiction of the apprenticeship myth: the conflation of learning and labor. Graduate students' academic freedom as learners is qualified, but we cannot collapse the distinction between their pursuit of an advanced degree with the work they do to pay for it. In other words, I did not come here to learn how to teach business writing; I do it because it pays my rent. Clearly, learning occurs anytime one teaches, but unless research universities wish to admit they are training the next generation of contingent faculty, it makes no sense to conflate my role as a student and my role as a poorly paid worker. In the starkest terms possible: I am not an apprentice to the director of professional writing. When I teach these courses, I am on equal footing with the other experienced instructors who do the same. Of course, these instructors are almost all graduate students and contingent faculty, which explains the function of the apprenticeship myth: imagining us as apprentices chips away at the foundation of our academic freedom. Core content can be imposed upon us by the master (journeyman?) as part of our training. Apprenticeship operates as a self-reinforcing, disingenuous justification of academic freedom's erosion.

The myth's second sustaining fiction arises from the practical reality of the corporate university. In my department, students receive one or two semesters of training at most, then are on their own until the program administrator decides to intervene. I have taught business

writing for five years, never once speaking with the program head about any specific issues arising in the classroom. Graduate students function as autonomous instructors, which is perfectly acceptable, considering how often we teach these courses: we become experts through experience and there is no need, nor any particular effort, to meaningfully supervise instructors. We teach; the administrator does not know how we teach; then for some unknown reason, he dictates multiple aspects of the curriculum. Supervising our apprenticeship seems to entail the development of comprehensively proscriptive content rather than any substantive engagement that might provide at least some support for the claim that we are apprentices.

The conflation of labor with learning and the fiction of supervision provide the foundation for an illusory apprenticeship that preemptively eliminates graduate students' freedom to teach the classes that the university must admit we are qualified to teach. Most universities require graduate students. They rely on our labor, yet they must paradoxically and somewhat surreptitiously insist that we are qualified to teach undergrads while denying that we are qualified enough to enjoy academic freedom. Obviously, administrators could do as they have done countless times and simply say, "We don't care about your academic freedom," but with graduate students they don't have to. In many cases, even those who would fight for professors' rights deny that graduate students should possess the same rights. I am not suggesting that graduate students and professors should enjoy identical academic freedom. I simply wish to point out that the economic reality of higher education necessarily redefines how we think of academic freedom. Graduate students are apprentices, but also laborers. We provide a service now and represent the future of our disciplines. The apprenticeship myth obfuscates the multiple roles graduate students fill and presents an initial challenge that must be met as we begin the work of detailing a contemporary, nuanced definition of graduate student academic freedom.

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