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## Paranoia and Professionalization: The Importance of Graduate Student Academic Freedom

By Dan Colson

As one faculty member in my department often reminds me, graduate students are in an inherently paranoid position. The balancing act of teaching and coursework, the inscrutable whims of a dissertation director, and the heartless machinations of “the University” can all portend our demise. We imagine ourselves tenuously holding on, one unfinished chapter or poorly taught class from being unceremoniously dumped into the overeducated, underqualified mass of jobless failed scholars (perhaps an even worse fate than that of those unemployed academics who have finished their PhDs). In short, the pressures of graduate school turn us into the self-conscious subjects for whom there need be no watchful eye manning the panopticon: Chimerical scrutiny leads many graduate students to unwarranted stress.

My professor reminds me of this ubiquitous paranoia to ease my mind, but the truth is, graduate students *are* in a unique position. We are less secure than full faculty yet, in many cases, more secure than non-tenure-track faculty. Although the AAUP has published

recommended institutional regulations for graduate student appointments (RIR 14), there remain easy mechanisms for removing graduate students: unrenewed teaching contracts, periodic reviews, and “satisfactory progress” haunt graduate students and create an atmosphere of uncertainty. Unfortunately, this inherent contingency has few definite boundaries. As a graduate student, I *should* worry if my work is insufficient or unsatisfactory, but all too often I *must* worry about issues that extend beyond the quality of my research into elements of the learning process itself. I am learning to be a scholar and a teacher at the same time, but the relationship between my scholarship and my teaching is complicated and troublesome.

Ideally, good teaching is tied to quality research, but the general movement toward uniformity across the classes graduate students teach most (rhetoric and composition courses at my university) restricts student instructors’ ability to build their courses around their strengths. These strictures have three key consequences. First, they prevent graduate students from developing a pedagogy and persona that is tied to their scholarship: They cannot learn to teach in the way that faculty–scholars are expected to teach. Second, uniformity lowers the quality of education for undergraduates. The best teaching is equal parts passion and expertise: Centralized curricula (required textbooks, themes, etc.) cannot account for the strengths and weaknesses of individual instructors. The quality of education suffers when overworked graduate students are asked to deploy a curriculum that is ill-suited to their research and personalities. Third, since most graduate students are sustained financially by their teaching, and their place in a graduate program is contingent on renewal of their teaching contracts, these constraints generate more uncertainty and paranoia. Restricting graduate students’ academic freedom, their right to teach classes in a way that embraces their singularities, places them in a catch-22: Teach within a structure that has little chance of preparing them for the work they hope to do in the future; or disregard curricular restraints and risk losing funding.

The AAUP recognizes that graduate students are entitled to the same academic freedoms as all faculty, but in practice we seldom are granted them. In this essay, I argue that the instability

of our position makes graduate student academic freedom an important concern for everyone invested in the future of our profession. I use events and experiences in my department as starting points for a discussion of some key aspects of graduate student academic freedom. Building from the belief that in my profession's job market, preparation for teaching is as important as our proto-scholarly output, I focus on graduate students' right to make decisions about their own syllabi, pedagogy, and classrooms. Ultimately, I contend that graduate student academic freedom is at risk of further erosion and that our profession will suffer if we allow graduate students' paranoid fears to become reality.

### **Teaching, Learning, and the Ethical Campus**

In September 2008, the University of Illinois Ethics Office disseminated an issue of its newsletter, *Ethics Matter*, entitled, "Prohibited Political Activity." As the U.S. Presidential election grew near, the Ethics Office sought to make university employees "aware of the elements of the *State Officials and Employees Ethics Act* that may impact [our] participation" in the political process. Presumably, this e-mail was sent to all university employees, failing to account for the qualitative differences between the tasks, duties, and responsibilities of a faculty member, a service worker, an office worker, or a graduate student. It includes an alarming series of expressly prohibited political activities: "Preparing for or participating in a rally or event related to a specific political candidate, party, or referendum"; "soliciting contributions or votes on behalf of a particular political party or candidate"; "assisting at the polls on behalf of any political party, candidate, or organization"; "surveying or conducting an opinion poll related to anticipating an election outcome"; and "running for political office" by using university resources are all forbidden.

This e-mailed newsletter set off a backlash that was in part an indignant reaction against the underlying ideological foundation of state ethics laws that attempt to regulate academic professionals in the same way as other state agents (legislators, for example), a government intervention unable or unwilling to recognize the differences between a state bureaucrat and a

professor. Much of the response, however, was directed to the form and content of the Ethics Office's specific efforts to preemptively restrain political activity around the 2008 election cycle. In other words, while many on University of Illinois campuses might recognize the systemic problem—a litany of efforts to legislate academe—the work of academic freedom often takes place on more concrete grounds. I see four main issues in the *Ethics Matter* newsletter that intersect on the issue of academic freedom and, more specifically, on the rights of graduate students, who function as both teachers and students.

The first notable characteristic of the newsletter is the Ethics Office's troubling alternation between specificity and vagueness. For instance, while the ethics staff felt confident pointing out that "placing a collection jar on your desk or even in a break room to solicit funds for a specific political candidate or party" is prohibited, they also acknowledged that "the concept of prohibited political activity is challenging to fully define" and that their examples only covered "some of the main categories of commonly occurring prohibited political activity." So, while any number of activities *may* be prohibited, janitorial staff, office assistants, and associate professors must decide whether their actions fall under the general categories of prohibition. In light of this incomplete picture of forbidden political expression, the newsletter's admission that "the University Ethics Office cannot and does not intend to police each of the campuses" resonated as a threat: Yes, we provide a handful of detailed scenarios to avoid, and we do not intend to actively surveil our employees; *but* you should be aware that your actions may transgress into an undefined arena of prohibited political activity. It would be possible to perform a political activity without knowing it is prohibited or without getting caught, but this issue of *Ethics Matters* served notice that each employee should monitor his or her own "responsibilities to the law."

The second key issue is the newsletter's hollow assurances about the intentions of the University Ethics Office and the spirit of ethics laws. It stated that "first and foremost, the law is not intended to hinder or in any way violate your personal freedoms," but continued, "the activities defined as 'prohibited' per the law are only prohibited while employees are on

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University time or using University resources or property.” In an effort to reassure us that our freedoms of speech and political expression were not being infringed, *Ethics Matters* simply redefined “personal freedoms” to exclude large chunks of one’s time. The Ethics Office construed “personal freedom” as something that can be suspended: When you are working for the university, using university resources, or standing on university property, you cease to be a person, cease to be free, or perhaps both. Of course, for the those of us who live in university towns (where “university property” can extend for miles), meet with students off campus, and rarely step out of our jobs as academic professionals, this restriction is troubling at best: Academic freedom ensures our right to be “political,” whether we are in the state’s prohibited space or not.

Defining “political” is the third key issue raised by the ethics newsletter. According to the University Ethics Office, “wearing a pin encouraging others to vote that is not specific to any particular party or candidate” was perfectly acceptable. In fact, the University of Illinois Chancellor sent a mass e-mail to the entire Urbana–Champaign campus encouraging us to vote. It is acceptable for an instructor to wear a button encouraging her students to vote and for an administrator to use his position to do the same? Using university resources and time, they can prod students and employees to participate in the fundamentally political act of voting, but they cannot plug a specific candidate? Clearly the belief that one should vote is a political position, just as the anarchist belief that one should not vote is also a political position. So why is one prohibited while the other is not? The short answer is that legislators and administrators have a woefully parochial view of the “political.” Unfortunately, this narrow view is a political position in itself, so we find ourselves subject to laws that redefine our “personal freedoms” and prohibit some “political” activity. Politics is defined and restricted simultaneously in ways that have serious consequences for academic freedom.

Suppose a university professor in Gender and Women’s Studies, Political Science, English, History, or any other discipline regularly teaches lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues from a progressive political stance. Under the University of Illinois Ethics Office guidelines, this

professor is not participating in any prohibited activity. But, if a gay marriage initiative were on the ballot in Illinois, the professor would have to avoid discussing the issue. Therefore, during the time when the issue becomes most relevant to our students, it becomes political and thus prohibited. The rest of the time, according to Illinois state law, gay marriage is not a political issue. Obviously, there are those who would like to forbid any politically engaged discussion of such issues, but this immediate threat to academic freedom has a grave consequence:

Academics are among those most qualified to define politics and who have distinctive reasons why their politics should not be restricted. The quality of education and thought decrease if they are, so by defining the “political,” these laws interfere with the academic profession.

At the height of events surrounding the ethics guidelines, I spoke with administrators in the University Ethics Office and officials with the state Office of Executive Inspector General (the agency charged with enforcing the *State Officials and Employees Ethics Act*). I was told once to use “common sense” to avoid prohibited political activity and then later, when I asked specifically about issues that might be discussed in an English graduate seminar, I was told we probably should not be talking about those issues at all. The latter statement, while disturbing in itself, mostly demonstrated that those who draft and enforce these laws know little about the numerous disciplines that would cease to function if “politics” and “academic freedom” are defined by conservative activists and legislators: The chasm between administrative common sense and disciplinary conventions is so wide that the rules would be comical if the consequences were not so dire. It is one thing to run afoul of the world’s David Horowitzes and quite another to be violating a “common-sense” interpretation of state law that undermines your discipline’s learning process.

We may feel relieved that some activities we recognize as political are not in the crosshairs of the state ethics office (though they may be under attack by other opponents), but acquiescing to a legislatively defined conception of “politics” merely opens the door for further restriction of certain political positions. It is acceptable to encourage students to vote because, for many, democracy is the horizon of politics; but this same blind logic will say that teaching capitalism is

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apolitical, while teaching Marxism is political, which is what some conservative activists already claim. Despite its efforts to reassure university employees, *Ethics Matters* and the laws it interpreted are fully part of the discourse coloring progressive positions as political indoctrination, while conveniently redefining the “political” from moment to moment.

The final key issue in the University Ethics Office’s newsletter was the failure to distinguish between job types and the multiple roles some individuals play on a university campus. There may be some positions that are minimally affected by the state’s definition of politics, but for graduate students, who attend class, teach class, do research, and even live on campus, the restriction of political activity is especially problematic. When the bureaucrat with whom I spoke expressed an opinion on what topics should and should not be covered in one of my discipline’s graduate courses, he placed the burden on the professor: He or she is responsible for curtailing any inappropriate discussion. This alone is unsettling, but what about the graduate students taking the course? According to the Ethics Office’s original articulation of the rules, we are considered employees any time we are on campus, so during the classes we take—the classes in which we should feel free to challenge, to express, to learn—we are haunted by the specter of a “law [that] isn’t always as clear as [the University Ethics Office would] like.”

The forms of graduate student academic freedom differ from that of professors: In our classes we are proto-scholars, preparing ourselves for academic conferences. Similarly, when we write a chapter of our dissertation in the library, not only should we share with faculty the right to academic freedom in research, but we should also not be seen as “representing . . . the University.” As graduate students, we move in and out of roles on a daily basis; at times we are students, at others we are teachers. The Ethics Act does not know the difference between a custodian and a professor, or the difference between a graduate student in her study carrel and one teaching a classroom full of first-year students. For those graduate students who live on campus, there would be almost no time to participate in political activity, however it is defined at the moment. It is vital that universities recognize the importance of protecting graduate student academic freedom, precisely because of the multiple roles that we play. We are learning

to be scholars and teachers; we function as both and must not be restricted in the content of either. Undefined boundaries or prohibited activities; hollow assurances that gesture toward self-governance; inane, shifting definitions of politics; and an inability to distinguish between our qualitatively different roles will virtually ensure that graduate students are paranoid—even as we learn to be academic professionals, our positions are made uncertain by rules established by those outside our disciplines.

Less than three weeks after *Ethics Matters*, “Prohibited Political Activity” was distributed, B. Joseph White, president of the University of Illinois, sent an e-mail clarifying the university’s position. President White faced pressure from the national AAUP and from factions on campus—including an on-campus political rally attended by faculty and graduate students that was widely covered by the media—and other organizations (including the ACLU), which caused him to retract some of the more egregious restrictions. Still, he did not touch on the lingering issues of academic freedom. He asserted that university employees can “attend partisan political rallies” and “wear partisan political buttons,” but says nothing about the political activities that occur every time we teach. He affirmed our basic right to free speech and political expression, but stopped short of addressing the academic freedom issues arising out of the ethics newsletter. Beyond an empty assurance that he “will work with state officials to ensure that interpretations of the Ethics Act do not restrict constitutionally guaranteed rights of state employees and, in the case of higher education and this University, academic freedom,”<sup>1</sup> President White has had nothing specific to say about academic freedom. Despite his

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<sup>1</sup> The Illinois General Assembly recently amended state law to specify that “The University may not prohibit any faculty or staff members from (i) displaying political buttons, stickers, or patches while on University property, provided that such display by any member of the faculty in an instructional setting is for a purpose relevant to the subject of instruction; (ii) attending a partisan rally, provided that the employee is not on duty; or (iii) displaying a partisan bumper sticker on his or her motor vehicle.” This minimal addition leaves much to be desired. For one, state agencies like the Office of Executive Inspector General is not part of the University, but is charged with enforcing ethics laws—even these few protected activities might be subject to state intervention outside the University power structure. In addition, the amendment fails to note who will determine “relevance.” Presumably, the instructor would be in the best position to do so, but this omission is foreboding.



generously stated intentions, he failed to address the aspects of the issue that are unique to academic professionals.

Though many on my campus viewed President White's e-mail as a victory, several truths were revealed by these events: a) If infringements on freedom are strong enough, people will respond; b) The battle to maintain academic freedom often falls below this threshold; c) The right to define our disciplines and what constitutes "politics" is central to academic freedom; and d) Graduate students will continue to be a contentious site for these battles. We are in a unique position and, paranoid or not, that position does not feel secure. Graduate student academic freedom is important *because* our place is uncertain and because we are the ones who will define our disciplines and their "political" nature in the future.

### **Learning to Teach on the Institutionalized Campus**

In the English Department at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, most graduate students teach two courses per semester. While this teaching load is not uncommon for students in my field, it is a significant workload that coexists with the pressures of coursework, exams, and dissertations. I have seen two major responses to our teaching responsibilities: We can view them as a burden, a necessary evil; or we can view them as an opportunity to improve our teaching, as key preparation for the job market and our future careers. Most graduate students I know experience some mix of the two: We must teach if we want to attend grad school, and we will teach in the future, so we should learn how to do it well. In other words, we accept a trade-off. The university gets cheap labor, we get experience. I am not saying this system is ideal—the struggle to ensure that graduate students maintain some control over their own labor is ongoing in unions across the country—but merely that many of us recognize the positive aspects of a less-than-perfect situation. A problem arises, however, when administration—from the highest levels of the university to more immediate departmental administrators—attempt to reduce the autonomy necessary for graduate students to maintain the balance between the realization that they are cogs in an increasingly corporate machine and the hope that, in their classrooms, they

are something more. Rightfully paranoid graduate students find themselves at the intersection of institutional control and academic freedom.

In my department, every graduate student teaches some version of composition, with the majority teaching courses from the rhetoric sequence. For many, Rhetoric 105, a required course for almost all first-year students, is their first teaching experience. Consequently, the rhetoric program for many years has offered training, mentorship, and guidance to new and continuing teachers. First-year teachers participate in orientation, a semester-long professional seminar on college teaching, and regular meetings with an experienced advisor. In short, my department has a history of providing ample support for graduate student instructors. Alongside this support structure is a tacit understanding that seasoned teachers will have the freedom to make most decisions about their courses—they may choose textbooks, assignments, themes, etc. This autonomy is one of the reasons I chose the University of Illinois and I argue that it is one of my department's greatest strengths: Upholding academic freedom for graduate students creates a better learning environment and produces quality teachers. The U of I English Department is filled with graduate students who take their teaching seriously, because they are invested in the intellectual process of pedagogy. They teach well because they are free to experiment, to *learn* how to teach rather than being *told* how to teach. We have had several graduate students win campuswide teaching awards and we have many instructors teaching with innovative pedagogies. Put bluntly, graduate students in my department are damn good teachers, because they teach a lot and because they are free to make teaching part of their scholarly education.

Unfortunately, this freedom is not secure. Graduate students are cheap labor. We teach virtually every one of the 20,000-plus undergraduates on campus. And, as untenured proto-scholars, we are largely powerless. Thus, we are an obvious site for the institutionalization of the university. As higher education moves farther toward a consumer model of education—where we sell an education to our student-customers—some call for cohesion and consistency at all costs. The corporate university's insistence upon a quality "product" threatens to turn teachers (especially non-tenure-track faculty and graduate students) into automatons and to

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eliminate one of the vital graduate student learning experiences. The pressures of the corporate university are not new, but we must continue vigilantly to recognize restrictions on academic freedom and to fight them. Herein lies the heart of this essay: Graduate student fears, unfounded or not, call for faculty responsibility. Graduate students do much of the grunt work of university education. Even when secure, our positions are weak. We are one of the key strongholds of the future of academic freedom. Departmental administrators should resist the impulse to curtail their graduate students' academic freedom and we all should strive to ensure that each instructor retains his or her freedom to *teach*.

In spring 2009, the incoming director of the Undergraduate Rhetoric Program at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, announced a meeting for rhetoric instructors, at which all would have an opportunity "to contribute questions and ideas" regarding pending changes to the program. Though the meeting announcement assured graduate students and non-tenure-track faculty that rhetoric staff were still in the "early stages of the planning process," it hinted at major changes like "a move away from adopting outside textbooks" for all freshman-level rhetoric courses. In fact, this plan was sufficiently developed (two weeks before the opportunity "to contribute questions and ideas") that the program director was seeking the contribution of "assignments and activities" centered on the "unified theme of the [alternative textbook] volume: the University of Illinois." According to this initial announcement, these materials would comprise a database—funded by "modest seed money" from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences—which would replace "outside textbooks" with material designed "to better fit the specific needs of U of I students." Reaction to this announcement was minimal. The history and success of graduate student teaching autonomy momentarily suspended our paranoia: We assumed the database would be voluntary.

Perhaps the announcement's language should have generated alarm. It casually admitted that the university's "[push] for more cohesive general education and long-range sustainability" were motivation for the changes, but graduate students did not imagine that we would be required to use the database, to adhere to a theme, or to eliminate outside textbooks. The

meeting was billed as a “forum,” but the changes were announced to a room full of stunned instructors. The tone was one of certainty and codification: No more outside textbooks. Assignments must be submitted to the database well in advance. Instructors may only use assignments from the database. The University of Illinois will be the theme for all rhetoric classes. “Early stages of the planning process” had turned into a rigid system of institutional control that would strip pedagogical autonomy from more than 100 instructors. Details were few, but the meeting’s tenor made the announcement’s message clear: The university is changing; we should change with it; and the forms of change will be decided at the departmental–administrative level and higher, not by individual instructors. Only then did rhetoric instructors—graduate students and non-tenured faculty—become distressed.

The furor escalated quickly as word of the meeting (which many who were uninterested in using a centralized database did not attend) spread. The primary form of indignation was the most basic and most practical (“Are they really going to tell me what textbooks I can and cannot use? I have to submit my assignments six months in advance? The University of Illinois is my theme? Does this apply to *all* instructors?”), but several important questions arose after the meeting. The first was due to a lack of clarity: Did attendees at the meeting accurately read its tone and content or are these changes still being refined? This first question led directly to the second and third: How do we get more information? And why are we learning about such significant changes so late in the process? I contend that these questions circulate around two key issues: academic freedom and shared governance. Neither can be taken for granted, certainly not by graduate students, and both exist in the troubled interstices of institutional control and individual instructor autonomy.

The initial and predominant reaction was a visceral invocation of academic freedom combined with a personal defense of one’s teaching: “I am a good teacher and you should not tell me how to teach.” It is this response—at core a reassertion of academic freedom as a right and as a practice that promotes quality teaching and scholarship—that prompted graduate students and non-tenure-track instructors throughout the department to vocalize their

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discomfiture. Many were troubled by the programmatic changes as such, but also by the underlying implication that rhetoric teaching as a whole was unsatisfactory, that wholesale change was needed to meet the course's fundamental academic goals. The meeting sparked a series of private, semi-private, and public discussions centered on how best to respond to what appeared as an overzealous abridgement of academic freedom. Different individuals and groups chose different ways to respond, but the overall reaction was severe and definitive: The changes as currently structured were unacceptable. Some graduate students met with their faculty advisors, some met with the department head, some went through the departmental committee system, and dozens wrote individual descriptions of how the changes would adversely affect their teaching. We asserted that instructor autonomy is one of the strengths of our department; that we are not opposed to change, but believe that each instructor has the right to make his or her own pedagogical choices. My department's excellent rhetoric instructors—teachers who had become experts on rhetoric through experimentation, dedication, and practice—defended academic freedom against what seemed to be an attack.

Oddly, however, we did not know whether the attack was intentional or not. From the outside, the sudden pronouncement of these changes appeared to be a coordinated surprise, orchestrated by the incoming director of the Undergraduate Rhetoric Program and parties in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences: The university calls for "more cohesive general education" and the college sees an opportunity to acquiesce and simultaneously to "generate revenue." As complaints grew more clamorous, it became difficult to know where the original plan ended and revisions began, which was itself a problem.

The AAUP has insisted upon the importance of shared governance for nearly nine decades. Its current *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities* claims that shared governance "calls for adequate communication [amongst the governing board, administration, faculty, students, and others], and full opportunity for appropriate joint planning and effort". The way these changes were revealed exposes a process that falls woefully short of AAUP guidelines. The *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities* specifically states that "the interests of

all [members of the university community] are coordinate and related, and unilateral effort can lead to confusion or conflict." In this situation, it is difficult to know who took part in making these curricular modifications, because both department-level and college-level administrators have refused to disclose documentation about the funding and development of this new rhetoric program. According to the AAUP's statement, "Faculty has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matters, and methods of instruction."

Considering the widespread shock after the rhetoric staff announced these changes, it is clear that few faculty were consulted. I see two key problems here.

First is the opacity with which these changes were developed. Obviously, the director of the Undergraduate Rhetoric Program is charged with overseeing the rhetoric program. Since few, if any, tenured faculty teach rhetoric, it might appear that shared governance could be practiced with communication occurring only between this single faculty member and administrators above the department level. Such a stance, however, would violate the spirit of shared governance, be anti-collegial, and fail to recognize the university's interconnectedness as envisioned by the *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*. In the aftermath of the rhetoric office's announcement, several faculty members expressed their concern over not knowing about a change that would so significantly affect their graduate student advisees. Programmatic changes need to be discussed by affected parties, which extend far beyond the faculty members who teach a specific class.

Second, the *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities* does not discuss graduate students. It covers faculty at some length and includes a section entitled *On Student Status* (which focuses on students purely as students, not in the multiple roles graduate students play), but for curricular changes to a program like rhetoric, in which most classes are taught by graduate students, I argue that graduate students should be considered faculty. The AAUP's *Statement on Graduate Students* insists that "graduate students should have a voice in institutional governance at the program, department, college, graduate school, and university levels," but I go a step farther. Based on the document's claim that "graduate students have the

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right to academic freedom,” I contend that graduate students must be involved throughout the decision-making process for curricular changes to classes that are taught predominantly by graduate students. No faculty member should stand for being left out of governance processes that will strongly affect their scholarship or their teaching, nor should graduate students be denied this involvement. I do not know who was involved in the early decisions regarding changes to the University of Illinois Rhetoric Program (I assume shared governance took place to an extent), but I do know who was not involved. Not only were these changes announced suddenly, with a draconian flair, but suggestions were requested after the fact: “The changes are made in principle; now tell us what you think.” Here is a case where graduate student academic freedom is intimately tied to shared governance. If graduate students hope to maintain autonomy as instructors—to become better teachers instead of educational vending machines—we must have both academic freedom and shared governance.

In my department, the sincere objections of a large group of instructors won us a reprieve, but it may be temporary. After the changes were announced, after a forceful backlash, and after the intervention of our department head, it was announced that the discussed changes were only preliminary ideas. We still were not allowed to see documentation of the original plan, but we were assured that the new database would be voluntary for all but first-year instructors. Those of us who resisted the changes do not know whether we were victorious or not, because we do not know what really happened, which again is part of the problem. It appears that shared governance occurred *post hoc*, an unacceptable chronology. Certainly, we are pleased to retain our autonomy in this case, but subsequent events have shown that this battle will continue. Already, another meeting has been held (to discuss the adoption of a universal handbook), but in this instance only instructors who were already assigned to teach rhetoric in fall 2009 were invited. Non-tenure-track instructors, graduate students on fellowship, and those with a different teaching assignment for the fall semester were not invited.

Shared governance and academic freedom require transparency and multiple voices. Exclusion and secrecy can only damage my department and our profession. Paranoia amongst

graduate students in my department is high, because we do not know what will happen next. Will we lose the autonomy that helps us become better teachers? Will we be involved in the decisions that affect our future careers? Will we face repercussions if we stand up for our rights to academic freedom and shared governance? These questions should not haunt us, which is why all academic professionals are invested in graduate student academic freedom—it is vital if we are to learn to practice our profession.

### **Freedom, Unity, and Academic Professionalism**

It has been less than ten years since the AAUP adopted its statement on graduate students and, while it offers strong guidelines for graduate student academic freedom, it alone is insufficient. The *Statement on Graduate Students* begins with a lofty claim: “Graduate programs in universities exist for the discovery and transmission of knowledge, the education of students, the training of future faculty, and the general well-being of society.” It then proceeds to outline ten recommended standards for handling graduate student issues (from academic freedom to healthcare). While I tend to agree with the statement’s elevated language about the importance of graduate education, I will settle for much less. I would be satisfied with an acceptance of its first recommendation’s opening sentence: “Graduate students have the right to academic freedom.” This simple statement, which adds that graduate students “should be able to express their opinions freely about matters of institutional policy” and that they should be afforded “latitude and respect as they decide how they will engage in teaching and research” would be sufficient to ameliorate a good portion of graduate student paranoia.

Even in the midst of asserting graduate student rights, however, the AAUP’s statement begins to qualify them. It recognizes that we are “still learners in the profession” and thus signals the transitional stage that precludes any static definition. Our paranoia arises from our uncertain position as students and teachers, as non-students and non-faculty, as learners and proto-professionals. Academic freedom is taken for granted by many and fought for by few, but graduate students bear the extra burden of our position: Even some who defend faculty



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academic freedom look askance at granting the same rights to graduate students. Yes, we are still learners, which is precisely what makes academic freedom and shared governance so important. We are learning how to practice our profession, and faculty members, we need your help. Learning the profession involves research, teaching, and service. A good dissertation advisor offers advice, not edicts. The research we do during our careers will not be micro-managed (though it will be evaluated), nor should it be now. The same holds for teaching: Offer support and guidance, but allow us the freedom to innovate, to determine appropriate content, to learn through successes and failures. Do not assume that all graduate students think about research first and only; most of us care deeply about our students. So, when it comes time to make programmatic and curricular decisions about *our* classes, value our contributions. We are invested, which is the best environment for shared governance. All I really ask is that you recognize that we are you! A few years younger, a great deal less experienced, but still dedicated individuals who share the same rights, responsibilities, and passions. Graduate student academic freedom is the freedom to learn, because learning requires freedom.

Similarly, I ask graduate students to embrace their academic freedom. Use it and do not confirm the stereotype of the uninterested instructor, phoning in his teaching while frantically pursuing his research. Academic freedom is a right, but also a practice that requires engagement with the material, the praxis, and the students. Good research and good teaching are connected, so do not wait until your first professorship to link them. Also, remember that much like the faculty who can help us retain our academic freedom, we have a responsibility to future graduate students. At present, only first-year rhetoric instructors in my department are mandated to use the newly developed database. I insist it must stay this way.<sup>2</sup> We must not

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<sup>2</sup> My sense is that it will not. I have recently learned that students who graduate from my department's PhD program and are subsequently hired as postdocs will be treated as "new employees" and thus required to use the new system. In other words, an instructor who has taught rhetoric for seven years as a graduate student will be required as a postdoc to change her syllabus to comply with the new rhetoric guidelines. I suspect that the same may be true for incoming graduate students and that this voluntary option will soon become a program-wide mandate. I also suspect that current graduate students, who will be affected by this new rule, were not adequately involved in developing it.

relax and imagine that the corporate university's cry for "cohesive" education will stop curtailing academic freedom. As graduate students we cannot secure our academic freedom, our right to learn how to teach well, by selling away the rights of the current undergraduates who will soon join us in our programs. Ultimately, while our position is largely powerless, we must continue to demand academic freedom for graduate students—not the freedom to do whatever we please, but the freedom to prepare to be academic professionals.

Finally, I ask faculty members not to deride our paranoia and graduate students not to let it become debilitating. Our fears are not entirely unfounded: Graduate students experience many legitimate concerns. However, academic freedom and shared governance should not be among them. We should not have to worry that teaching as an open learning experience will become a mindless, automated, apolitical activity. As I write this article, I feel paranoid. I fear how faculty members in my department will react. Maybe my anxiety is baseless, but it is real. Only through a mutual embrace of graduate student academic freedom—unity between faculty and students—will this paranoia be assuaged. We are on the same side, we just need to work together: The independence academic freedom guarantees is best secured through collective effort.