

The Washington Post Magazine

The
Education
Review



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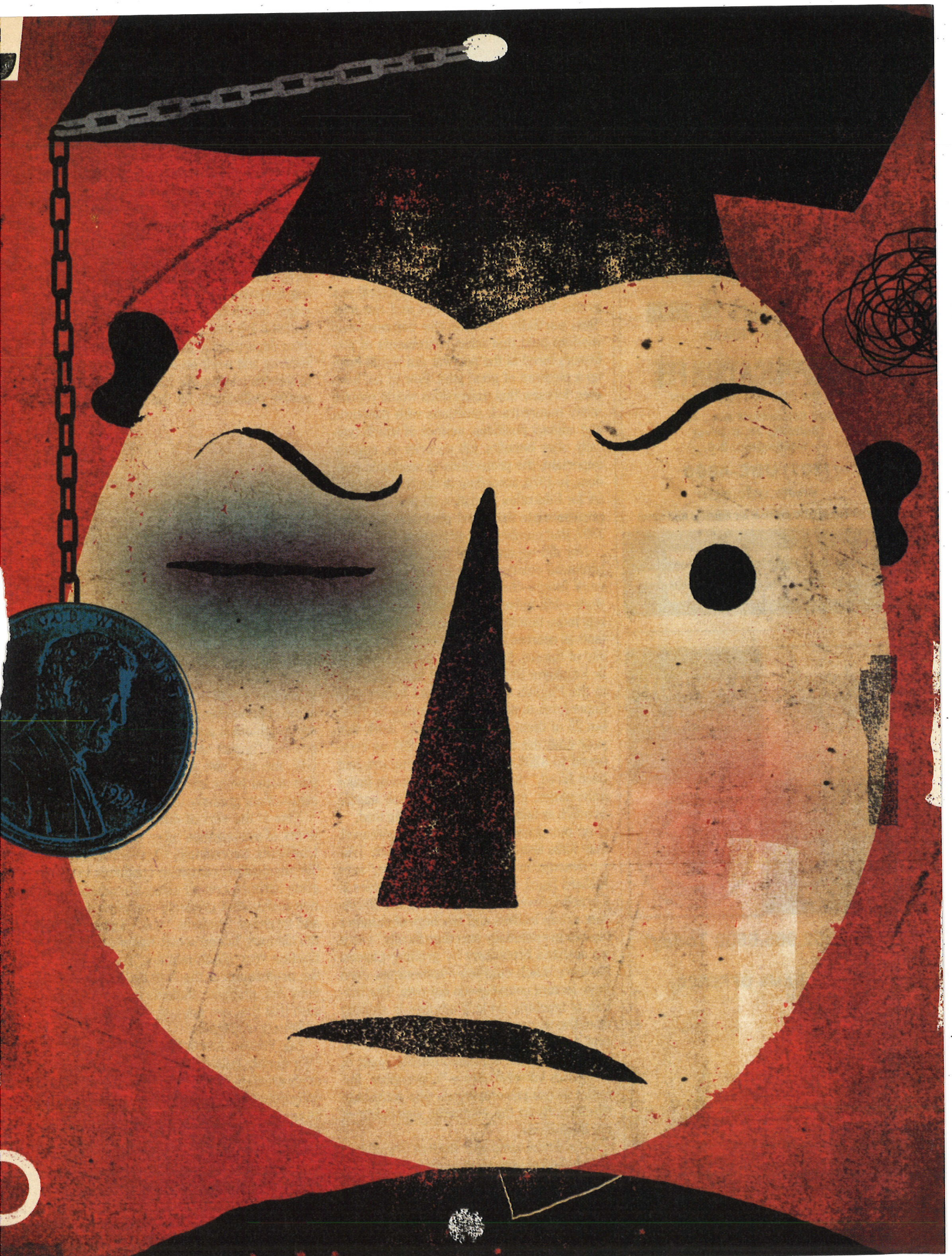
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April 9, 2000

The {Graduate Economics} workload is heavy, the pay is paltry, the prospect for tenure ever slimmer. A grad student makes the case for labor unions {By John H. Summers Illustration by Christian Northeast}

Last August, George Washington University graduate students staged a spirited public rally at the campus's "Professors Gate." Protesting low wages and a lack of medical benefits, they chanted, "One, two, three, four, GW keeps its teachers poor." At the University of Maryland in College Park, discontented graduate students have gathered more than 300 signatures and have lobbied the state legislature for the right to form a union. In the past several years, campaigns like these to organize graduate students into legally recognized unions have become almost commonplace. Ten years ago, only eight such unions possessed bargaining rights in the United States. Today, the number has risen to 22, and a dozen additional campaigns are roiling both public and private universities across the nation.

For much of the last century, graduate education hewed closely to the apprenticeship model. A doctoral student took courses, wrote a dissertation and simultaneously learned to teach undergraduates by serving an apprenticeship under a faculty mentor. As an apprentice, or teaching assistant, the student performed a few tasks designed as a long introduction to the craft of education—leading small-group discussion sections, helping with grading and conferring frequently with the professor, who shouldered the burden of the instruction. Then as now, the degree process took many years, but those who did earn their PhD could look forward to a tenure-track job that, if all went well, would yield





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{VIEWPOINT}

a secure, prestigious, decently paying position in an intellectually alive community. Only the campus radicals talked about graduate student unions.

For some students who, like me, began their doctoral programs in the last decade, that apprenticeship model seems broken beyond repair. To us, the modern university resembles not a haven of mentoring and academic cooperation, but rather an efficiency-minded corporation that exploits our low-paid labor. We flocked into doctoral programs between the late '80s and the mid-'90s, partially because the conventional wisdom held that mass retirements of professors hired in the postwar era would open up a plethora of good jobs. Few of us, however, foresaw that universities would replace many tenure-track positions with part-time and adjunct positions, neither of which typically offer benefits, job security or, equally important, the protections of academic freedom. In 1970, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, 22 percent of the professoriate occupied part-time jobs. By 1997, that number was 42 percent.

Nor did we anticipate that as part of this profound restructuring of the educational work force—the casualization of academic work—big universities would also begin to rely more heavily on graduate teaching assistants as sources of cheap labor. At the University of Kansas, for example, the Kansas Public Employee Relations Board found that TAs in the English department had taught zero upper-level undergraduate courses in 1979, but 25 of them in 1993. The TAs' work that year cost the university "\$51,297 as compared to \$209,413 if faculty members had been hired," the board said. At many major universities, graduate students now handle as much as half of the entire teaching load.

As our classroom duties have increased, they have also changed character. The TAs' job description has "evolved over time," says Richard Hurd, a professor of labor studies at Cornell University. "They went from discussion group leaders and teachers of summer classes to essentially part-time faculty." Once we assisted professors by grading papers. Now we teach courses—sometimes even large lecture courses—on our own. The burden of teaching undergraduates is shifting from the tenured faculty to us. Little wonder that as teaching undergraduates increasingly has become our responsibility, many of us identify ourselves not as "apprentices" but rather as campus employees who contribute significantly to the economic well-being of our institutions.

In addition, graduate student organizers across the country point to disproportionate wages paid per course (professors generally get far higher rates, sometimes for teaching

the same courses), declining or nonexistent health benefits, rising tuition and enrollment fees, and the absence of effective grievance procedures. At Maryland, the university's own financial aid office states that graduate students need \$12,375 to live adequately in the metropolitan area for nine months. Yet TAs in the English department there receive only about \$9,800 per school year after taxes, according to student organizers.

Several organizers at GW described their grievances in a recent e-mail to me: "The majority of part-time faculty and graduate teaching assistants at GWU are denied a living wage, health care coverage, child care, and realistic job descriptions. We are excluded from departmental meetings; we have no job security and work on a contingent semester-to-semester basis. We have no means to negotiate collectively for the terms of our em-

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ployment. In addition, we are not provided adequate administrative support, and we work without the office space and other facilities needed to teach students well."

GW spokeswoman Barbara Porter replied in another e-mail that the university disputes some of those claims (though she declined to say which ones) and questions unionization's possible "impact on teaching and research." GW, she said, also maintains that "unionization would be inconsistent with the student status of our graduate teaching assistants."

This is the sort of distinction that opponents of unionization often invoke. At Yale University, for example, where a high-profile TA-unionization campaign continues to generate acrimony on all sides, the administration insists that graduate students are first and foremost "students," not "employees" of the campus. In one sense, this semantic distinction very much matters: To qualify for the protections of the National Labor Relations Act, graduate students must make the case that they are not just students but also university employees.

Yale Provost Alison Richard said last year, "We deeply believe that our graduate students are here primarily to be students." The university maintains that only 10 percent of its courses are led by graduate students. Yet, when TA-led discussion sections are figured into the total number of hours of teaching a Yale undergraduate receives, it turns out that about 40 percent of those hours are the responsibility of TAs, according to a 1999 re-

port issued by the Graduate Employees and Students Organization at the university. No understanding of the terms "student" or "apprentice" can accommodate the sober reality that, despite its huge endowment, Yale uses low-paid graduate students as teachers—and "employees."

For their part, many professors are genuinely concerned that the adversarial character of unionization could disrupt the mentoring relationship between graduate students and their faculty advisers, and possibly harm the teaching of undergraduates. Student-teacher relationships often require an unusual measure of trust, even a certain sort of intimacy. The very idea of learning, after all, implies a vulnerability and openness.

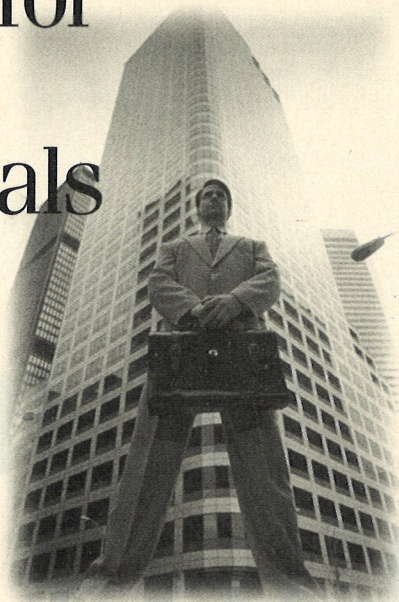
Those concerns are reasonable. Yet efficiency-minded university administrators, not unions, have fostered the conditions for such anxiety in the first place. They have turned courses into commodities and made teachers—whether graduate students or professors—interchangeable. In any case, a 1999 survey conducted by a Tufts University professor on the issue of faculty-graduate student mentoring suggests that unions do not disrupt learning. The study asked 300 faculty members at five institutions that recognize TA unions whether collective bargaining had harmed mentoring. Ninety percent said no.

Do unions threaten undergraduate teaching? Again, little evidence suggests they do. In fact, graduate student organizers making their case almost always include among their demands better teacher-training programs and other teacher-support mechanisms for graduate students. Some unions may very well end up defending narrow bread-and-butter issues at the expense of broader teaching concerns, but nothing in the principle of unionization makes that outcome necessary.

In truth, TA unions likely will not alter the basic structure of graduate education. Their presence on campus simply signals the extent to which American universities have evolved into stratified economic enterprises. Organizers at Maryland, GW and elsewhere have allied with part-time and adjunct instructors partly as a practical strategy, but also as a way to demonstrate the common plight of all non-tenured "knowledge workers." Some organizing drives have also included nonacademic staff—janitors, cooks, housecleaners. When such broad coalitions form around shared problems, such as disproportionate pay, unsteady work and inadequate health coverage, what does that say about universities? It says, among other things, that college teaching has been downgraded from a noble profession to just one more transaction in the service economy ■

John H. Summers, a PhD candidate in American history at the University of Rochester, earned his master's degree from George Mason University.

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