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**DISMANTLING THE IVORY TOWER:
IDEOLOGICAL FRAMING OF THE
UNIVERSITY THROUGH GRADUATE
STUDENT UNIONIZATION**

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Comparative International Education

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examines graduate student unionization and the role of international students within these movements. Through 51 interviews with domestic and international graduate students at two research-intensive universities as well as discourse analysis of 246 administrative documents, this study investigates conflicts between graduate student workers and university administrations, focusing on the way various stakeholders engage in ideological framing. These moments of conflict offer a window of insight into how the university, graduate study, and academic work are being framed and re-framed in different contexts. Drawing upon theories of ideological framing (McAdam & Scott, 2005) this study shows that graduate student activists are reframing the purpose of the university, dismantling the idea of the university as an ivory tower, disconnected from social issues and political turmoil. This positioning of the university places demands for action in various arenas, particularly racial justice, addressing local community problems, and supporting immigrants and international students.

The labor relations examined in this study demonstrate ideological conflicts that exceed material disagreements over pay and working conditions. Union activists and university administrations are expressing disparate visions of the university, academic labor, and academic-social relationships. Fundamentally, differences center on the tension between the unitary, disconnected ideology of neoliberal individualism and the interconnected, socially embedded, community outlook of social movements. These broad ideological framings translate into themes including the critique of the corporate university, the social embeddedness of the ivory tower, and the ineffable individuality of academic work.

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DEDICATION

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The social role of higher education is heavily contested, complex and subject to glaring contradictions. Variouslly framed by governments and citizens as a site of opportunity and social mobility (Brint & Karabel, 1989), a cultural gatekeeper (Posselt et al., 2012), driver of economic growth (Thorp & Goldstein, 2010), or elitist country club (Jacob et al., 2018), colleges and universities navigate a fraught line among vying priorities while also strategizing organizational survival and prestige. Furthermore, this complex group of social roles changes over time, responsive to shifting economic, social, and political conditions. Neoliberal economic policies have set the stage for a shift in the understanding of postsecondary education from a public to a private good (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Along with changes in the social role of higher education, the internal organization and valuation systems in colleges and universities have undergone profound alterations in what Slaughter and Rhoades described as “the academic capitalist knowledge-learning regime” (2004, p. 22). Within this regime, the individual benefit of education is emphasized and knowledge production is evaluated by its marketability. Public funding for higher education declined precipitously and academic research, particularly in STEM fields, has become a valuable commodity in the ‘knowledge economy’ (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Academic labor has seen profound changes in the nexus of this process of neoliberalization of higher education. The university instructional workforce changed from a predominantly tenure-track faculty to one in which most faculty were hired on a part-time and/or contingent basis. This change has had profound implications for graduate study and graduate student labor.

The nature of graduate study and graduate student work has changed substantially as universities have become increasingly market-oriented. A growing percentage of academic labor is done by graduate student teachers and researchers (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Since 1990, the graduate student workforce has grown and international students have become a larger percentage of that workforce (Lafer, 2003; Hegarty, 2014; Cantwell, Lee, & Mlambo, 2018). The same changes that motivated colleges and universities to increasingly market themselves to international students have influenced the educational and social experiences of not only international students but also domestic students, faculty, and staff (Rhoades, 2016; Lafer, 2003). The confluence of internationalization and market-orientation have created new roles within the university and redefined old ones (Rhoades, 2016). In this changing work environment, graduate students are in theory focused mostly on study and scholarly training but in practice colleges and universities rely heavily on them as paid contributors to the work of the institution through activities such as teaching, research, and student support. This gradual change in their position within the university has resulted in education and career experiences that are quite different from those of previous generations. For example, while the need for graduate teaching and research assistants remains robust, the prospects for academic careers after graduation has declined, leading to an oversupply of graduates which the job market does not support (Kroeger et al., 2018).

With decreased post-graduation job prospects and increasing workloads as instructors and researchers, graduate students at many institutions have turned to collective action to demand better pay and working conditions (Kroeger et al., 2018). In almost all recent cases, college and university administrators have vigorously opposed

unionization. One strategy they have used to undermine unionization efforts is to single out international graduate students as a vulnerable population, suggesting in various documents that international students may lose their visa or suffer other consequences as a result of unionization (Bittle, 2017). This administrative strategy has gained popularity in the context of overall growth in the numbers of international graduate students.¹ While it is unclear how effective this particular strategy has been, it is a distinctive trend seen across both private and public institutions. Graduate student union collective action is one circuit of activity that links a set of related contemporary issues in higher education: internationalization, corporatization, and social movements - and is therefore a productive point of research for learning not only about unions and graduate student working conditions, but also for studying the ways that changing social and economic conditions are redefining roles within the academy more broadly.

The purpose of this study is to understand what graduate student employee collective actions tell us about the changing nature of higher education and its role in society. How do graduate students think about their role in the university? How do administrative authorities conceptualize graduate student work and how does that influence their response to graduate student unions? Graduate student collective action and the role of international students in the contest between top-down and bottom-up definitions of their work provides an ideal situation to examine these questions. Graduate students are liminal members of the higher education organization, by definition a group

¹ While the trend over the last 20 years has been a dramatic increase in international students, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, there has been a leveling off of international graduate students since 2016 and a small but significant decline in overall international student enrollment. However, for the purposes of this study the overall trend in which international graduate students have grown to become a substantial community within the overall population is the significant contextual factor.

that cannot be severed from the organizational context and whose position and participation within the organization is limited in duration. They are both insiders and outsiders, who have critical social ties to institutional authorities but at the same time their interests are not always served by the goals of the institution and its agents. International graduate students further epitomize this insider/outsider role, navigating many of the tensions that domestic students do but further complicated by linguistic and cultural differences. In targeting international graduate students to discourage unionization, institutional agents have contested the boundaries of the collective social network, espousing an individualistic vision of academic work that not only clashes with unionizing rhetoric of the collective but also contradicts institutional values around scholarly community and collaboration. Institutional attempts to discourage unionization have primarily relied on the argument that graduate students are *students* and not *employees*, that their teaching and research activities are apprenticeships, not work. This line of reasoning is important to institutional interest because of the way federal labor laws legislate the right to unionize, but by engaging in this discourse they implicitly shift their framing of graduate study. GSUs, on the other hand, reframe the working relationships of graduate students to de-emphasize differences of academic discipline and national origin in order to foster solidarity among graduate student workers (Lafer, 2003). This research examines unionization conflicts as moments that reveal the ideological stakes in which the social role of universities and the meaning of academic work are contested. I find that union activists and universities are engaging in a contest that is ideological as much as material, expressing comprehensive frames of understanding that

encompass not only graduate student workers and their activities but also the university and academic labor as a whole.

Statement of the Problem

This research brings into conversation several strands of higher education research: academic unions, graduate student work, international graduate students, and social movements in higher education. Literature on graduate student unions, like that on other types of academic unions, often focuses on one of three broad categories of questions. The first category concerns questions of what types of social, economic, and institutional factors promote or discourage graduate student unionization. Researchers have investigated a range of such questions, such as the role of academic corporatization (Rhoads & Rhoades, 2005), time to degree (Julius & Gumport, 2003), and institutional norms (Lee et al., 2004). The second set of questions asks what impact unions have on graduate students in terms of educational outcomes, wages, benefits, and workload (Rogers et al., 2013). The third category of research focuses on how graduate student unions affect institutional goals such as research productivity and financial bottom-line (Lafer, 2003). Graduate student unionization movements occur within the contexts described by this previous research, but no studies have accounted for the extent to which such movements introduce new organizational strategies and institutional logics into the academy.

The existing body of research on graduate student work is very small and what research there is does not account for the last 20 years of change in graduate student working conditions. Furthermore, what research exists looks at graduate student work as part of the developmental path of graduate students rather than examining the role of

those work activities in the functioning of the university. The work of international graduate students has had virtually no scholarly attention, even though they now constitute a substantial percentage of the graduate student workforce. Because conflicts over graduate student unionization are moments when the work of graduate students and the role of international students is debated, these moments present opportunities to study these under-researched aspects of higher education.

Previous research on graduate student unionization has focused on outcomes, financial impact, and likelihood of collective action. Less understood is how union organizers and university administrators develop contrasting visions of the academy in a process that is context-specific and intersubjective. This process engages multiple stakeholders in ways that offer opportunities to learn about changes in the organization of colleges and universities. Furthermore, trends in administrative response to unionization have emerged in recent years, including a tendency to target international students that is central to this study. The effort to organize and legitimate a collective bargaining unit of graduate student employees navigates new positional identities, new circuits of knowledge and power, and new ways of understanding certain constituents of the organization and their relationship to each other. Central to graduate student unionization movements is the question of their identity as students and/or as employees. These negotiations of positions and definitions do not end with the signing of a collective bargaining agreement but, rather, continue to be contested and redefined through ongoing labor relations. This research examines the way graduate students position themselves in a conceptual scheme of the college or university, how administrative response to unionization reveals dominant institutional logics, and how international graduate student

employees make meaning of the way they are positioned in this debate. Through 51 in-depth interviews combined with document analysis of 246 university documents, I analyze both how administrative documents carry implicit definitions of the academic institution and its social role and how they assign roles to international and domestic graduate student workers within the organization. More specifically, this study is a multi-sited analysis of how graduate student unions generate new definitions and relationships within the academy and how administrative responses reflect the implicit logics that both contest and incorporate emerging definitions of graduate work. It also investigates how international students make meaning of these tensions and how they are discursively represented in the context of a labor conflict.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study investigates the phenomenon of graduate student work in an organizational context with consideration of the role of specific participants: administrative decision-makers, graduate student union and unionization leaders, and international graduate students. This study is situated, then, in research on graduate student unions, graduate student work, international students, and social movements in higher education.

Graduate Student Unions

At the beginning of the 2018-2019 academic year, there were 33 recognized graduate and/or student employee bargaining units in the United States, with many more organizations scheduled for a vote (Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions, 2018). Most of these were established in the wave of graduate student unionization that occurred in the 1990s, when critiques of corporatization and globalization of higher education were prominent in public discourse (Rhoads & Rhoades, 2005). However, in the last 10 years a second wave of graduate student unionization has occurred. From 1990 to 2000, the number of unionized graduate employees increased by 175% (Smallwood, 2001). Then from 2005 until 2015, the number of graduate student unions grew substantially as another wave of unionization movements spread across the country. Since then, private colleges and universities have seen their own wave of unionization following a 2016 National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruling that defined graduate student workers as employees, granting them the right to collective bargaining (Kroeger et al., 2018). Since then, 16 private institutions have held graduate student union elections, 13 of which were

successful (Patel, 2019). Add to this the substantial number of unionization votes occurring at public institutions and it becomes clear that higher education is in a moment of significant change and tension over the roles of graduate student employees and definitions of their work.

Academic labor unions have not historically received the same kind of scholarly attention as traditional unions among labor studies scholars nor have they received much attention from scholars of higher education (Rhoades, 1998). Even within the limited body of research that is focused on unions in the academy, the majority have examined faculty unions, with graduate students included tangentially or partially (DeCew, 2003). The existing research on graduate student unions falls into four broad categories: the legal history of graduate student unions, the conditions that encourage or deter unionization, the impact of unionization, and unionization as a reaction to the neoliberal university.

Legal History

Graduate student unionization is a phenomenon historically and currently framed by legal debates about the employee status of graduate students. The right to unionize is governed at various levels and subject to legal interpretation and changing political influences. Several researchers have taken up the complex legal history of graduate student unionization efforts as an object of study. The key legal issue driving changes in graduate student unionization is the question of whether or not graduate student workers are employees or, conversely, whether their teaching and research activities are part of an apprenticeship (Bodah, 2000; Hayden, 2001; Rinschler, 2010). As

a result, the history of graduate student unionization has been framed by rulings from the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), whose rulings particularly constrain or authorize unionization at private institutions, and the labor boards of various states, whose rulings apply to unions at public institutions. In the 1990s and early 2000s, several rulings set the conditions for a wave of unionization events. Scholars in the early years of the 21st century reflected back on the wave of unionization in the preceding decade as a unique phenomenon. In a broad based review of legal issues in higher education, Bodah (2000) described graduate student unionization as “the most widely-reported higher education labor relations issue of the 1990s” (p. 319). Singh, Zinni, and MacLennan (2006) and DeCew (2003) narrated the history of graduate student unionization, beginning with the first collective bargaining agreement at the University of Wisconsin in 1970. Sing et al.’s detailed history examined court decisions, documents from both universities and national unions, and news articles. The authors described the early days of GSUs and the wave of unionization that took place in the 1990s, identifying the key legal issues and describing trends in administrative response to graduate student unionization movements. Several studies that examine this period of graduate student unionization history found that university administrators have opposed graduate student unionization on the grounds that unions would impinge on academic freedom and disrupt faculty-student relationships (Rogers et al., 2013; Rowland, 2000; Wickens, 2008). DeCew (2003) framed his review of graduate student unionization in a similar way but focused his history on key events and movements, specifically the unionization movement at Yale, New York University, and the University of California system institutions. Drawing primarily upon news articles, he used these examples to tease out

key issues, including administrative resistance to unionization, arguments for and against unionization, and the role of national union organizations such as the UAW.

Factors that Contribute to Unionization

Broad-based investigations of graduate student unionization have looked for trends in terms of which factors contribute to the likelihood of unionization. Julius and Gumpert (2003) looked at nationwide trends of unionization in the 1990s to determine what conditions make such events more likely. They found that long time-to-degree, diminished post-graduation job prospects, and presence on campus of other labor unions increased the likelihood of graduate student unionization. Numerous studies described the way state and federal laws discouraged or even prohibited graduate student unionization (Bodah, 2000; Rinschler, 2010; Saltzman, 2000). In their case study of graduate student organizing at UCLA, Lee and colleagues (2004) examined aspects of organizational culture that presented barriers to unionization. Based on interviews and document analysis, they found that subcultures among organizational groups (graduate students, faculty, administrators) complicated unionization efforts in different ways. In a quantitative study that considered percentage of non-tenure track faculty, institutional prestige, and connections to other labor movements in an analysis of the likelihood of a graduate student unionization event, Dixon, Tope, and Dyke (2008) found that increased reliance on non-tenure track faculty, elite status, and presence of labor recruitment on campus all increase the likelihood of graduate student unionization.

Unionization in the Neoliberal University

Several studies contextualized trends in graduate student unionization against the backdrop of the increasing marketization of higher education. One of the most widely cited articles on graduate student unionization is Lafer's (2003) analysis that focused on graduate student unionization movements in the 1990s and early 2000s, a trend he attributed to the shifting economics of higher education which created changed working conditions for graduate student employees. "The boom in campus organizing activity is primarily a reaction to changing labor conditions" (p. 26). Tracing the history of increased unionization, Lafer's analysis pointed to the parallel history of cuts in higher education funding and rise of entrepreneurial strategies among colleges and universities. Lafer identified a correlation between the 10% decrease in the number of tenure-track faculty, rising enrollment, and a 40% increase in graduate teaching assistant positions. With increasing reliance on tuition revenue and profits from research-generated patents, graduate student labor was essential to the functioning of the academy even as job prospects for graduates diminished. "This contradiction lying at the heart of the corporatization process has fueled the unionization movement" (p. 29). Other scholars have situated unionization as a product of or critique of the corporate university. Discenna (2010) examined the 1995 Yale graduate student strike for unionization using critical rhetoric analysis, arguing that graduate student unionization movements arise from the academic labor conditions. In Discenna's analysis, the graduate student unionizing rhetoric named the deficits of the corporate university while resisting the exploitation of graduate students. Rhoads and Rhoades (2005) took a similar approach in their multisite case study of graduate student unionization events. Contextualizing the

unionization movements against the backdrop of decreased public funding of higher education and increasing corporatization, the authors framed the rhetoric of graduate student unionizers as a critique of the corporate university. A number of researchers have described graduate student unionization, in conjunction with adjunct faculty unionization, as a tool to limit or reverse aspects of academic capitalism (Bousquet, 2008; Lafer, 2003). However, Kitchen (2010) drew contradictory conclusions in his study examining the GSU leaders at the University of Florida. Based on interviews with graduate student union members, Kitchen concluded that while GSUs voiced *critique* of the corporate university, they believed that unions contributed to more than detracted from corporatization by legitimating the practice of using graduate students for inexpensive labor.

Effects of Unionization

The potential organizational impact of unionization is a critical question for both scholars and university decision-makers. One of the key legal arguments that university administrations have made against unionization is the potential damage that might be done to graduate student-faculty relationships and the potential threat to academic freedom (Rinschler, 2010). On the other hand, many union activists have claimed that unions can lead to higher pay and better benefits for graduate student employees (Rhoades & Rhoades, 2003). Drawing upon nationwide data, Schenk (2010) concluded that GSUs raised graduate student stipends for teaching assistant positions but the effect for research assistants was not significant. Rogers, Eaton, and Voos (2013) analyzed survey data from eight public universities and found unionized graduate employees have higher pay. The same study found that, contrary to the claims of university

administrations, union-represented graduate students reported similar levels of academic freedom and positive relationships with faculty as compared to those not represented by a union. Similar results emerged from studies that survey faculty attitudes about graduate student collective bargaining, finding that most faculty did not report that GSUs interfere with their ability to advise or work with graduate students (Hewitt, 2000; Wickens, 2011).

Graduate Student Work

Though graduate students have contributed to the work activities of the university almost as long as there has been graduate study, there has been little research on the way their work is organized, how it contributes to the university, or how graduate student workers organize their work activities. The most common ways that graduate students work within the university are teaching assistantships and research assistantships though there are also a variety of other forms of work in non-academic departments (Applegate, 2002). The majority of previous research has focused on teaching assistantships. In the wake of institutional policy debates about whether or not graduate students are qualified and competent teachers, a few studies examined the perceived effectiveness of graduate student teaching (Mills & Hyle, 2001; Nyquist et al., 1991; Golish, 1999). For example, Tulane and Beckert (2011) surveyed instructors, undergraduate students, and graduate student teachers about whether the teaching assistant was an effective teacher, finding that while instructors generally had high ratings of teaching assistant effectiveness, undergraduate students learning from the TA had significantly lower ratings of their teaching competence. Other research has examined graduate student teaching as a part of socialization to the academic profession

(Staton & Darling, 1989; Sullivan, 1991). Mena et al. (2013) found that doctoral students in an engineering program experienced their teaching assistantships as a form of apprenticeship as they become a part of the academic community of practice. As scant as the literature on teaching assistantships is, even less work has been done to examine the role of the research assistantship. In a study examining both research and teaching assistantships, Ethington and Pisani (1993) found that graduate students with research assistantships were more likely to report that their assistantship was relevant to their scholarly development than graduate students with teaching assistantships. All of the research on assistantships of any type has focused on them as a developmental pathway, thereby reinforcing the idea that the work is part of an apprenticeship rather than labor done as part of the overall work of the university.

International Students

Much research on international students has taken the individual student as the unit of analysis, focusing on psychosocial development (Arthur, 2008; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011), academic outcomes and engagement (Zhao et al., 2005) and social integration (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017; Trice, 2004). International students in general and international graduate students in particular experience significant challenges in linguistic, social, and cultural adjustment while living and working outside their home country (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Poyrazli, et al., 2002; Zhou & Todman, 2009). At the same time, some studies have shown that despite these challenges, international students have agency in the development of scholarly identity (Marginson, 2014). Studies such as these describe the learning and living conditions of foreign-born graduate students.

The challenges and motivations experienced by international students at the level of the individual are framed by the social and cultural context. Many studies have investigated the profit motive of internationalization of higher education, finding that the increasing market-orientation of universities, particularly in English-speaking countries, is deeply embedded in internationalization strategies (Altbach & Knight, 2006; Karram, 2013; Lee, 2015). Altbach and Teichler (2001) described financial exploitation of international students as one of the potential pitfalls of internationalization. Deschamps and Lee (2015) interviewed senior international affairs officers at 30 U.S. public universities and found that in the widespread expansion of internationalization efforts, profit-seeking motives coincided with more traditional educational goals such as global collaboration. General studies such as these examine international students at the polar ends of investigation: at the micro level of individual development and at the macro end of broad trends toward internationalization. Of particular interest to this current study is research that examines interactions between international students and their academic institutions including studies focused on how they are rhetorically or discursively represented, examinations of the labor and working conditions of international students, and the resistance or activism of international students.

Representation and Discursive Construction of International Students

A small subset of studies has examined the way international students are represented through university rhetoric, public media, or faculty statements. Such research has generally looked at these representations without disaggregation between academic level, including both undergraduate and graduate international students. However, when international graduate students *are* identified in these studies, they are

typically characterized as productive and compliant. For example, Rhee and Sagaria (2004) examined representations of international students in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* using critical discourse analysis. Examining issues from 1996 to 1999, a period of rapid growth in international student enrollment in US higher education, they identified three dominant themes, all of which they frame with theories of imperialism and globalization. They find that international students are represented as capital, as racialized subjects, and as subjugated others. Significantly, when they discussed and provided textual evidence for the first two themes, their quotes and excerpts were mostly focused on undergraduate international enrollment or non-specific, aggregated images of international students. However, the final theme was more directly concerned specifically with international *graduate* students. Presenting international students as subjugated others, they argued, both underlines Western superiority and justifies discrimination and exploitation of international students. Homogenized from their individual national origins into an amalgamated ‘other,’ international students are presented as “diligent acquiescent migrant workers” (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004, p. 86). Every example that they pulled from *The Chronicle* to demonstrate this particular theme was specific to graduate students, though they did not address that distinction in their analysis. In one article they drew upon for their study, a senior faculty member characterized international graduate students as biddable and cheap:

‘Most of us know very well and even admit to each other privately that the reason we import so many foreign graduate students is that they are a source of unquestioning, hard-working, intelligent, cheap labor who require little or no

advising and who help us further our own careers' (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004, p. 86, quoting Burgess, 1997)

While both undergraduate and graduate international students might be framed by themes of economic growth and neo-racism, concerns of the first two themes that Rhee and Sagaria outlined, graduate students are constructed specifically in terms of their labor, as docile workers.

While Rhee and Sagaria (2004) gathered data from a journalistic platform that, in their argument, represented a consensus on dominant ideas in higher education, more recent studies have been able to look at institutional representations of international students through university websites. Ford and Cate (2020) examined the websites of 161 US universities and found that international students were often inserted into graphic presentations of domestic racial diversity. In doing so the websites presented 'international student' (a category presumably comprised of people of a variety of national origins and racial identifications) into a single racial category. This practice both aggregated international students into a homogenous group and reconstructed them as diversity assets. Furthermore, they found that university websites represented international students and their presence on US campuses in a variety of ways. These constructions narrated international students as malleable institutional assets that could serve a variety of institutional goals. The authors found that international students were represented in instrumental ways, as different types of institutional assets. In the university websites studied, international students were variously narrated as sources of economic gain, sources of diversity, and global prestige. These three broad themes overlap with the themes identified by Rhee and Sagaria (2004), indicating that across time

(from the late 1990s to 2019) and platforms (news articles and university websites) there are sustained ways of representing international students and their presence on US campuses.

Based on critical discourse analysis of both national-level discourses from media outlets and scholarly research on international students in the US and Canada, Karram (2013) outlined two distinct and apparently conflicting themes: international students as economic assets and as recipients of support. While the latter, drawn primarily from scholarly articles aimed at generating suggestions for practice for those in international student support positions, aimed to promote the well-being and academic success of international students, Karram pointed out that, like the economic asset discourse, the support-oriented discourse maintains the superiority of the host country. “Within this discourse the student is often constructed as the passive recipient of institutional support and care” (Karram, 2013, p. 7). In Karram’s analysis, though the discursive representation of international students in the scholarly documents at some level served to limit the discourse of international students as commodities, in other ways these two discourses are two sides of the same coin.

Stein and de Andreotti (2016) found similar dynamics among distinct discursive constructions about international students. Drawing upon previous literature as well as Canadian higher education policy statements, they investigated the role international students were variously represented as cash, competition, or charity. In a persuasive analysis, they connected the experiences of discrimination reported by individual students to the institutional drive to recruit and profit from international students. This discursive relationship is framed by the legacies of global colonialism, a ‘global imaginary’ of

Western supremacy that created the global flow of students and set the conditions for their experience. While their analysis was based in Canada and did not distinguish between undergraduate and graduate international students, Stein and de Andreotti demonstrated the way discursive constructions of international students were motivated by the institutional goals of universities in the Global North.

Labor of International Graduate Students

How does the scholarly literature represent the labor of international graduate students? A small subset of the literature looks at university marketing strategies to attract international graduate students for their research contributions, particularly in the sciences (Cantwell & Taylor, 2013; Taylor & Cantwell, 2015). Relatively few studies have looked at the work experiences of international graduate students, though some information about their labor processes can be gleaned from the broader literature on graduate student work that includes both domestic and international graduate students. Luo, Grady, and Bellows (2001) addressed this debate by comparing the competence of teaching assistants along variables of nationality, gender, and academic discipline. Using questionnaire responses and undergraduate student evaluations of teaching, they concluded that national origin was the most significant variable in the effectiveness of teaching assistants. International graduate teaching assistants received lower average student evaluations and reported different teaching styles. The authors concluded that international teaching assistants, “especially those who came from Asia, preferred the authority that came with the TA position and employed a formal teaching style” (p. 215). In their analysis, this culturally based difference in style led to less effective teaching. The authors’ recommendations for practice included additional training for international

teaching assistants, beyond English-language proficiency training. “Because of their particular cultural and educational backgrounds, [international teaching assistants] must understand the U.S. higher education systems and the U.S. classroom culture as well as U.S. undergraduate students” (p. 225). Luo, Grady, and Bellows are not alone in describing international graduate students as lacking in pedagogical skills (see Bauer, 1996; Davis, 1991; Twale, Shannon, & Moore, 1997). Even studies that found better undergraduate student performance in sections taught by international teaching assistants attributed this difference not to teaching excellence or content mastery on the part of international graduate students, but to their work ethic and commitment (Norris, 1991). Studies based on the first-hand narratives of international graduate student workers for the most part describe their labor process as one in which unpaid labor is a common expectation. Struggling against ambiguous expectations and discriminatory practices, international graduate students feel they are in a precarious position and vulnerable to exploitation. Lee and Cantwell (2012) interviewed 24 international graduate students and postdoctoral scholars at a public research university in the US, finding that unequal opportunities for participation (as compared to their domestic counterparts) were further stratified by patterns of neoracism linked to country of origin. All of the international graduate student workers in the study described a deeply inequitable system in which formal channels to file grievances were denied to them. While they described domestic colleagues as also vulnerable in certain ways, these conditions were exaggerated for international students. One international graduate student worker described having few options when working with an exploitative and abusive faculty supervisor. “They know that as foreign students we have limited recourses” (p. 53). Another international

graduate student research assistant described excessive workloads and forced conformity as the norm: “You have to work hard. You’re overworked and you get low pay and want to keep your positions and if overworked, everyone has to conform” (p. 55). He advised other international graduate assistants to “be prepared to have bad experiences in language, culture, and you have to know the rules of the game or you’ll be killed” (p. 55). International graduate student workers of various national origins reported exploitative working conditions but these experiences were stratified by national origin and racist tropes attached to certain nationalities. Women Asian graduate assistants, in particular, described being subject to sexual advances from male faculty supervisors. “They talk about sex and ask me about my sexual experiences and [are] really inappropriate” (p. 55). Furthermore, though international graduate students were routinely denied teaching assistantship opportunities, some graduate students from India thought graduate students from China were chosen first for research assistantships “because they are perceived to be more passive and less likely to contest the less desirable working conditions that are given to international students” (p. 54). On the other hand, students from African countries were denied the best research assistantship opportunities on the basis of their nation of origin. The qualitative data, based on international graduate student narratives, suggested that tropes identified in discursive analysis of policies and news reports, are, indeed, shaping the work experiences of international graduate students.

Overall, some studies indicated that foreign-born graduate research assistants produce more academic publications than those born in the US (Corley & Sabharwal, 2007). Lee and Cantwell (2012) suggested that faculty may seek out international graduate students for their perceived capacity for high research productivity. However,

these expectations may lead to conflict. Drawing upon survey data, Adrian-Taylor, Noels, and Tischler (2007) found that international graduate students reported the most common conflicts with their advisor involved disagreements over the extent of work responsibilities in their role as research assistants. Combined with research that found that international graduate students felt exploited for their research productivity but not supported toward subsequent academic careers (Lee & Cantwell, 2012), this area of research depicts the work activities of international graduate students as an important topic of study. Studies such as these give some context for understanding how international students make sense of their role in higher education organizations in ways that are relevant to their willingness to participate in unions. More recent research confirmed and elaborated upon this finding. Cantwell, Lee, and Mlambo (2018) interviewed 44 international graduate students working in STEM fields at four US public, research-oriented universities, focusing on working relationships with advisors and social interactions with domestic graduate students. Using a mergers and acquisitions conceptual frame, they concluded that international graduate student workers experienced instances of mutual benefit (mergers) as well as instances of exploitation (acquisitions), though the majority of their participants described the latter. Work duties for these graduate student workers included research, teaching, grant writing, and supervision of undergraduate students in labs overseen by faculty. In most cases, the students' work supervisor was also their advisor, blurring the line between work obligations and degree progress. Some students in this study reported synergistic relationships with faculty advisors/supervisors. One male research assistant from the Middle East described a mutually beneficial relationship in which the head of his lab fairly credited him for

contributions to research and allowed flexibility with his work schedule. “[My advisor] understands the fact that this is research. If you want research to go on for a long period of time, you need to be flexible with people” (p. 1491). Despite these promising accounts of beneficial relationships, most of the international graduate student workers in this study reported more negative work experiences in which they were legally dependent on faculty supervisors and exploited as cheap labor. Several research assistants described the ways they were prevented from switching from one lab to another by the threat of a revoked visa. Other research assistants described lab supervisors who refused to facilitate their graduation in order to keep them as employees for another year. This study painted an overall picture of international research assistant working conditions in which productive scientists are hired cheaply, for the most part strictly controlled, and for whom there might be benefits of publication and progression to degree.

International Student Resistance

Given the evidence of exploitative working conditions for international graduate student workers, is there evidence that they are resisting those conditions? Too little research has been done on their work activities and labor processes to draw definitive conclusions based on the scholarly literature. Research that draws upon first-hand accounts from international students themselves contains more evidence for consent than for resistance. In Cantwell, Lee, & Mlambo study, one engineering research assistant described his faculty supervisor’s requirement that he be in the lab from 8am to 7pm and commented, “I will work as much as my work wants me to work, but I’m a human” (p. 1492). Though the hours are well beyond the 20 per week that he is paid for, he does not set boundaries on his time, save for the limitations of his physical need for sleep. Many

aspects of how their work is structured act to generate this consent, including the hazy line between learning and working:

Suzy suggested that international students work so much because it is a mutual benefit: “It’s kind of like I’m not getting paid for doing the work it’s kind of like my education is being paid, I will do this for free and besides that I’m being paid so that I can pay my expenses. I don’t see like I’m getting paid for the work that I’m doing it’s kind of like extra.” (p. 1493).

Many research assistants discussed the difficulty in making clear distinctions between their role as a student and their role as a worker. This ambiguity necessitated a schedule of constant work without a clear sense of when they were working toward their degree and when they were furthering their faculty supervisor’s career. Though most of the international research assistants voiced a critical awareness of their exploitation, many viewed the excessive hours and sometimes humiliating working conditions as an unavoidable step in their journey toward an academic job. “Despite some of the negative experiences, many students resolved to accept the status quo focusing instead on the end goal of graduating, finding a job, and or returning to their home countries” (p. 1494). Even workers who found their degree progress delayed so that their faculty supervisors could have another year of their labor resigned themselves to these conditions on the promise of eventual graduation and help in the job search process.

Many international graduate student workers in several studies described coercive pressures that prevented resistance. One of the Asian woman graduate students in Lee and Cantwell’s (2012) study who reported experiences of sexual harassment and

cultural stereotyping by her faculty supervisor said she did not pursue formal measures to address these acts of discrimination because she had heard of other international graduate students whose visas were revoked when they filed similar grievances. Sato and Hodge (2009) interviewed Asian international doctoral students about their work and learning experiences at US universities and found that while most of their participants experienced heavy workloads in their assistantships, none of them had taken formal measures to address the situation for fear of the potential impact on their visa status or careers. This kind of experience was common in all of the studies that drew upon international graduate students' narratives about their own experience.

Despite the formal barriers to resistance, several studies described efforts to create solidarity groups among international graduate student workers. For the most part, these groups are centered around country of origin and, based on the way they are described in these studies, more helpful as a form of social support than in addressing exploitative working conditions. For example, Sato and Hodge (2009) found that the Asian graduate students in their study resisted pressures to assimilate primarily through the support they received from peer groups of other Asian graduate students. Similarly, Beoku-Betts (2004) interviewed African women doctoral students or doctoral graduates in the sciences. Her participants pushed back against the racist and sexist stereotypes they encountered through tight-knit social groups of African graduate students. None of the studies I reviewed described these groups as sources of rebellion against the systemic exploitation of international graduate student workers. However, they were the primary setting within which the participants could develop and voice their critiques of their working conditions.

Existing research offers very few instances that describe international graduate student workers speaking out against their supervisors or otherwise demonstrating resistance to their working conditions. Some studies have documented international *undergraduate* students voicing critiques of the way US universities recruited them as commodities but provided inadequate support and education once they were on campus (Su & Harrison, 2016). No studies focused on this kind of vocal critique from international graduate students. However, isolated moments are embedded in the literature in which international students describe their attempts to push back against exploitation. In Lee and Cantwell's 2012 study, one Chinese graduate student research assistant described his failed efforts to organize collective resistance "There is a lot of mistreatment... I ask (my Chinese friends who are discriminated) to talk to Dean but most swallow their fear because more conflict, no power, and may lose their [teaching assistant] position and financial support" (p. 55). Another graduate student worker, a woman from India, reported success in her resistance efforts. The lab she was working in was particularly exploitative and other graduate students who complained about the conditions were fired. "We cannot go into the department or visit the university [offices] and stuff like that. So they hold the funding ... and I managed to buck them very easily because I'm very outspoken" (p. 54). Though her initial attempts to appeal to departmental and college authorities about her work overload were unsuccessful, through repeated complaints she was ultimately successful and the excessive work hours were reduced.

Social Movements and Grassroots Organizational Change

Traditionally organizational research in higher education has focused on top-down models of leadership and policy-making (Kezar, 2012; Diefenbach, 2007). The scholars who have examined bottom-up or grassroots movements in higher education have often focused on student activists, looking at collective action in terms of the impact that activism has on their educational or developmental outcomes (Barnhardt, 2015; Cole & Stewart, 1996; Hernandez, 2012). Other scholars have looked at how colleges and universities can be transformed from bottom-up leadership, middle-out collaborations, or grassroots activism (Safarik, 2003; Kezar, 2012; Rojas, 2006). Though this research is not primarily focused on labor movements in higher education, it frames and informs this study by offering insight into how the universities resist, support, and/or respond to social movements within and through educational organizations.

Grassroots Organizational Change

A number of scholars have taken up the question of how colleges and universities might be transformed by movements that are initiated from the bottom-up. Some of this research examines individuals acting within their organizations for change while others look at instances of collective solidarity in efforts for change, particularly movements for social justice within and through the academy. For example, Safarik (2003) examined feminist transformation in colleges and universities, looking at how female faculty act as institutional leaders even though they do not hold positional authority. Allen and Estler (2005) examine the ways that faculty work collaboratively to create curricular change. However, these studies and others like them (see Hart, 2008; Astin & Leland, 1991;

Wolf-Wendel et al., 2004) have focused on the specific area of change with which the movement was concerned (ie, feminist academics, civil rights, diversity in the curriculum) rather than on grassroots change as a kind of organizational behavior. In each of these studies, however, activists within the university are taking action to reframe the organization as socially embedded, with obligations to enact equity within its borders as well as promote social justice in the broader society.

Among research that does look at the organizational processes of grassroots change in higher education, the focus has been on various forms of bottom-up leadership and when it is successful at achieving its goals. Kezar (2012) suggests that too much convergence with institutional authority diminishes the potential for effective change. She finds that “Institutional changes are considered compromised when the bottom-up and top-down work together ...an institutionalization does not require involvement or overlap with top-down leadership” (Kezar, 2012, p. 737). Contrary to first impressions, lasting institutional change does not simply emerge from the bottom to be codified by top-down convergence. Interactions with the dominant coalition are fraught with the threat of extinction for grassroots movements

Student Protest and Activism

The study of student activism on college and university campuses is a broad area of research that details examples of collective student movements exert influence over the organization. Relevant to this current research are the few studies that situate student activism within organizational processes. Vellela’s (1988) account of student activists in the 1980s describes protest as a way of penetrating the boundaries between academy and

society, connecting college campus to global conflicts and political issues such as the divestment protests that demanded institutional opposition to South African apartheid. Similarly, Robert Rhoads, writing about student protests in the 1990s, describes the way student activism connects social injustice to higher education in what he calls student activism in the “age of cultural diversity” (1998). In a study most closely related to this project, Rojas (2006) applies social movement theory to African American student protests demanding the establishment of African American studies programs on college campuses across the country. Drawing upon nationwide academic program data and news articles, he concluded that non-disruptive tactics (e.g., rallies, nonviolent demonstrations) were more effective at producing the desired outcome than disruptive tactics (e.g., classroom disruptions, violence). Rojas applies social movement theories to understand how tactics relate to the outcomes of student activism, concluding that protest, rather than institutional mimicry, have been the influential factor in the establishment of African American studies programs.

Conceptual Framework

McAdam and Scott’s (2005) analytic conventions for understanding the intersection of organizations and social movements provides a powerful lens for understanding the interaction of graduate student unions and higher education organizations. Their framework draws upon both social movement theories and organizational theories. Social movement theorists draw attention to the way grassroots movements not only organize resources and address grievances through collective action but also engage in ideological “framing” (Tarrow, 1998; Snow & Benford, 1988; Gamson, 1992) “Framing not only relates to the generalization of a grievance, but defines

the ‘us’ and ‘them’ in a movement’s conflict structure. By drawing on inherited collective identities and shaping new ones, challengers delimit the boundaries of their prospective constituencies and define their enemies by real or imagined attributes and evils” (Tarrow, 1998, p. 21-22). In parallel, organizational theorists have analyzed the way organizational processes are linked to, sometimes implicit, institutional beliefs and schemas of interpretation (Scott et al., 2000; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2015). Theorists have used the concept of “institutional logics” to describe the foundational ideas, definitions, and normative relationships upon which organizations operate, “the belief systems and associated practices that predominate in an organizational field” (Scott et al., 2000, p. 170). The two concepts, arising from different theoretical traditions, have much in common. Both explain how ideas can organize group behavior and how those ideas are linked to social values and social change. Drawing upon both these bodies of work, McAdam and Scott (2005) developed a common framework which is particularly useful in understanding interaction of graduate student unions and higher education institutions, a situation in which dynamics of social movements and complex organizations are relevant.

Of McAdam and Scott’s (2005) seven analytics, three are most relevant to this project. First, they emphasize the organizational field over the individual organization. The way social movement organizations (SMO) gain legitimacy, relate to other organizations, and fail or succeed in their aims cannot be fully understood by looking at one organization in isolation. In the case of graduate student unions, this is particularly applicable because of the pattern of waves of unionization and collective bargaining action observable over time. Both universities and union organizations are responding to

a shared environment as well as responding dynamically to other organizations within the field. Second, McAdam and Scott recognize that the power to define ideological frames is not evenly distributed throughout an organizational field but, rather, concentrated in the hands of dominant actors, often those with positional authority within organizations. Drawing upon social movement theory, however, they describe the way both dominant and challengers within the field express competing institutional logics that seek to (re)define values, norms, and collective processes of interpretation within the field. This aspect is particularly apparent in the conflict between union and institution definitions of graduate student work (or “activities”) and the role of international students within the work of the organization. Finally, they emphasize the importance of the social environment. External actors, though not considered members of the organizational field, exert influence on both organizational behavior and symbolic elements. For this study, national union organizations and union avoidance firms are active participants in the ideological framing of graduate work and university-union relations.

Research Questions

Based on the empirical research presented in the literature review and McAdams and Scott’s (2005) theory of Social Movement Organizations, this study pursues the following research questions:

- 1) How do the ideological framing of graduate students and their work differ when comparing bottom-up formulations with top-down formulations?
- 2) What is the role of international graduate students in unionization movements as described in administrative documents? How do international students self-describe their relationships with unionization efforts?

Chapter 3: Research Design

This research is a multisite case study drawing primarily upon data from semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and document analysis. Multisite case studies are well suited to investigations of contemporary phenomena, allowing for the contextualization of the complex interaction of different issues and circumstances. Yin (1994) points out that case studies are particularly appropriate when studying social phenomena in “real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). In order to more clearly understand the experiential quality of graduate work and firsthand accounts of unionization, while at the same time contextualizing these experiences within the frame of organizational action, this study drew upon multiple sources of data. The first source was semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with graduate students, both international and domestic, recruited at two universities that have been the setting of graduate employee unionization or union-related actions in the last ten years. The second source was university statements and publications regarding unionization efforts and/or collective bargaining actions drawn from twelve universities, all of which recently experienced a union action in which the role of international students was central to the outcome.

Site Selection

Interview participants were recruited from Penn State University and Washington University in St. Louis. These two institutions were chosen because as comparison points they underscore trends happening across the organizational field as well as offering specific contextual differences. At both institutions there was a failed vote for graduate

student unionization in which international students were targeted by institutional messaging. The unionization votes at these two universities happened within a year of each other, Penn State in 2018 and Washington University in 2017. Both universities hired labor consultant firms. Both institutions are classified by the Carnegie Classification as “Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity.” International students constitute a relatively high percentage of the overall graduate student population at each institution, approximately 40% of graduate enrollment.

However, despite these shared features the two institutions differ on a number of important organizational aspects. In terms of institutional control, Washington University, St. Louis is a private institution. As such, its labor disputes fall under the jurisdiction of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Penn State, on the other hand, presents an unusual status in terms of institutional control as a “state related” institution. This status means that the university retains certain characteristics of a public university, such as lower tuition rates for students who are Pennsylvania residents and receives some state financial appropriations, though at a funding level that constitutes less than 10% of its overall budget. However, as a state-related institution it also retains a considerable degree of autonomy, operating under its own charter and having an independent board. However, in terms of the legal framing of unionization, Penn State (and other state-related universities in Pennsylvania) have been treated as public organizations, with labor disputes under the jurisdiction of the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board (PLRB).

The two universities also differ in meaningful ways in the overall composition of their student enrollment. The total enrollment size of Penn State is much larger than

Washington (approximately 47,000 and 15,000 respectively) but graduate enrollment and percentage of graduate enrollment that is foreign born are about the same. This means that culturally Penn State may be less influenced by graduate student perspectives, since they constitute a much smaller percentage of the overall enrollment.

Another indicator of significant differences in organizational culture and overall characteristics of the student body include the data on average student family income. Based on financial aid data from 1999-2013, the average family income of students at Washington University in St. Louis was \$272,000, with 84% of the students coming from homes in the top income quintile (Chetty et al., 2017). These data points place Washington University among the most economically elite institutions in the U.S., in terms of student enrollment. By contrast, the average family income of students at Penn State University was \$101,800, with 43% of the student enrollment coming from families in the top income quintile. At first blush, this contrast would seem to paint a picture of a more economically accessible public university. However, it is important to keep in mind that Penn State is more than just the main campus in University Park, where all interview participants were drawn from. Rather, it is part of a network of Commonwealth campuses. Outside of the main campus in University Park, tuition is lower and many indicators suggest a more economically diverse student body. The Chetty et al. data is based on a composite figure that, for Penn State, combines all students from across the commonwealth network. On the other hand, data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) does not collect data on family income but does disaggregate by campuses within the Penn State system. Based on Pell grant eligibility as a proxy for low-income students, since eligibility for this grant requires demonstration of

exceptional financial need, Penn State University Park appears to be more like Washington University than the Chetty et al. data would suggest. In the 2017-2018 academic year, 13% of Penn State, University Park first time, full time undergraduate students were Pell eligible (NCES, 2018). In the same year, 15% of similar students at Washington were Pell eligible, suggesting that the undergraduate student enrollment at these two universities may be relatively close in economic makeup. All these factors taken together contribute to our understanding of the two research sites as organizations with unique contextual features which, nonetheless, share a number of institutional experiences and motivations, making them productive points of contrast and overlap.

Interview Participants

Interview participants were recruited through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015). Beginning with unionization movement leaders identified through news reports, official positions, or through recommendations from faculty and contact through the Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions (CGE) listserv, and the Washington University Graduate Workers Union listserv. The initial recruitment email invited union members to an interview to discuss, “the role of the work of graduate students in research-intensive universities.” I recruited further participants by asking unionization leaders to recommend participants and seeking further such recommendations from participants recruited in this second wave (Patton, 2015). This recruitment process continued until data saturation was achieved (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In total, I interviewed 51 union activists with an approximately even split between the two universities. See Table 1 for breakdown by institution and international/domestic status.

Table 1-1 Participant Demographics

Participants	PSU	WashU	Total
Domestic	15	16	31
International	10	10	20
Combined	25	26	51

Among the international students, there was a skew in terms of country of origin relative to the demographics of international graduate students in the U.S. more broadly. Though roughly half of international graduate students in the U.S. are from China (IIE, 2019), among the participants in this study, only two were from China (4%). Only 4 participants were from anywhere in Asia. Four student participants were from Turkey. Considering that Turkish graduate students represent only about 1.5% of all international graduate students in the U.S., this large representation is somewhat remarkable. However, due to the small number of participants, no broad conclusions about union participation and country of origin could be drawn

Recruitment Challenges and Distinctive Features

The participant recruitment process revealed a number of notable and unanticipated facets. First, though the initial recruitment email was sent out on the CGE and WUGWU listservs, some (10) of the respondents turned out to not be actively

involved in the union. Among these 10 respondents, 2 (from PSU) were unaware that CGE was a labor-related organization and had no knowledge of or strong opinion about graduate student unionization. Four respondents (from PSU) knew about the 2018 unionization vote but were opposed to unions in general or graduate student unionization in particular. This type of respondent had joined the union listserv out of interest in the union's non-labor related activism. Many of them had joined recently out of interest in the union's communications and actions in regard to university COVID-19 response. While these participants fell outside of the parameters of my research protocol, as individuals disconnected from or actively opposed to labor activism, the fact that a recruitment email sent out on the union listserv garnered responses from graduate students with such a diverse range of interests and commitments spoke to the complex and evolving role of these coalitions within their universities. Their activities and communications were broad-based enough to reach students who were unaware that the coalition had a foundation in labor activism.

Second, framed by previous research on graduate unionization, in the original conceptualization of this research project I anticipated interviewing union leaders and members who had participated in the 2016-2019 campaigns for unionization. What I discovered in the recruitment process is that many current union members were not at their respective universities at that time and, thus, had not participated in the effort to establish a legally recognized labor union. Nonetheless, all 51 interview participants have helped organize and/or lead union actions, whether as part of the campaign for a legally recognized union or in subsequent actions. The manner and timing of their engagement with the union has shifted my focus in the study from discrete unionization events and

toward an analysis of participation in a broader movement that includes labor relations along with a host of other issues and advocacy. In many ways, this expanded approach is more consistent with social movement theories that emphasize adaptation and shifting relationships between social movements and their institutional targets (McCarthy, 1996).

Finally, it is worth noting that there were a significant number of respondents (8) who answered the call for interview participants, scheduled an interview time, signed a consent form, but ultimately did not participate in an interview. Of these 8, seven were international graduate students who responded to follow-up communication by explaining that they felt the interview could be risky or detrimental to their careers or educational progress or, more simply, that they ‘just didn’t think it was a good idea until after graduation.’ One of these potential participants told me they had to check with their faculty advisor and subsequently told me they had been advised not to participate. While this experience in the research process does not properly constitute data since no interview was conducted with these respondents, it is suggestive in light of the fact that among international students who did participate in interviews, fear of reprisal was far more common than among domestic students.

Data Collection: Interviews

The goal of the one-on-one interviews is to gain knowledge about the working and learning conditions of graduate student workers and place those experiences within the organizational context. Based on McAdam’s and Scott’s (2005) theory and previous research, interview questions were organized around categories of work processes, social interactions, perceptions of the university, and perceptions of union events and collective bargaining organizations. Each interview took place via video conferencing software

(Zoom) and averaged about sixty minutes in length. Questions were open-ended to allow participants to frame their responses around ideas and issues most important to them. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was developed based on the conceptual frame of this research in conjunction with previous research on unionization but was subject to an iterative process of development in conversation with emergent data. For example, the initial protocol included a number of questions about work experiences and processes such as, “Can you speak to specific moments or work projects that have surprised you or been particularly satisfying?” However, in the first few interviews it became clear that participants did not center their work experiences in their union involvement. Rather, the social role of the university, its relationship to community and social justice, and the potential for change was central to their framing and their activism. Consequently, I revised the protocol to reflect the emergent data, adding questions that asked about community relations and broad-based reflections on the university.

Immediately after each interview, the data analysis process began with analytic memos. Guided by Saldaña’s (2016) strategies for qualitative data coding, I based codes on the research questions and applied these codes as I carefully read through the transcript line by line. However, initial codes were subject to an iterative process as emergent data influenced the coding rubric and new codes were added as initial codes were revised.

Data Collection: Administrative Documents

Because McAdam and Scott’s conceptual frame emphasizes the role of the organizational field, I included documents from a broader selection of universities. In the last 10 years, 12 universities have had unionization or union-related labor actions in

which international students and their working status have been highlighted in some way (see Table 2-1).

Table 2-1: Universities Included in Document Analysis

University	Type	Union Status	Event Date	Region	Int'l Grad %
Penn State University	Public	Unionization	2017-2018	Mid-Atlantic	41%
University of Wisconsin	Public	Union	2010, 2013, 2019	Midwest	24%
Washington U. of St. Louis	Private	Unionization	2017-2019	Midwest	35%
Columbia University	Private	Unionization	2014-2016	Mid-Atlantic	43%
U. of CA Santa Cruz	Public	Union	2019-2020	West	27%
U. of Oregon	Public	Union	2014	West	13%
Princeton University	Private	Unionization	2019	Mid-Atlantic	40%
Cornell	Private	Unionization	2002	Mid-Atlantic	51%
U. Chicago	Private	Unionization	2016	Midwest	25%
University of Pittsburgh	Public	Unionization	2017	Mid-Atlantic	18%
Northwestern	Private	Union	2017	Midwest	32%
UCLA	Public	Union	2014	West	20%

These documents were obtained primarily in one of two ways: directly from interview participants and through web scraping.

Web Scraping

Before interviewing any participants, I expanded the scope of my understanding of the contemporary issues surrounding graduate student unionization by conducting a three-part Google search to capture university statements and other representations about graduate student labor actions and unionization events, with particular attention to how universities were discursively constructing international students in the context of labor actions. In the initial stage, I used search terms “[Name of University] graduate student union.” From the returns to that search, I omitted journalistic accounts and clicked on university website returns as well as returns that linked to the official social media account of the university, the graduate school of that university, or other institutionally sanctioned sources. Any university representations of the graduate student union, the work of graduate students in the context of the labor conflict or message to or about international graduate students was documented and a screen shot was taken. After exhausting all such relevant returns, including documents linked to initial search returns, the second part of the search followed a similar process using search terms, “[Name of University] international graduate students.” Finally, to insure a comprehensive capture of all relevant documents, a last search using search terms, “[Name of University] [Name of Union] international” was conducted, following the same procedures for documentation and screen capture as in the previous steps. In the case of universities that had a labor conflict or unionization vote 5 years or more ago, (4 of 12 institutions) it was necessary at times to retrieve archived pages from cached web images using the internet archive search WaybackMachine (<https://archive.org/web/>). This first stage of document collection that took place before the interviews resulted in a total of 109 documents.

Documents from Interview Participants

Interview participants turned out to be a valuable source of further documents representing university-graduate student union labor relations and, particularly, describing the role of international students in labor conflicts. Interview participants were drawn from two universities among the 12 included in document collection but the documents they contributed to the data collection process were not limited to their respective institutions. In the course of the unionization campaign, the participants, in their roles as union organizers and activists, had developed solidarity networks with graduate student unions across the country. This network of graduate student labor activists had developed shared folders of administrative documents that they organized and drew upon to develop inoculation campaigns. The administrative trend of targeting international students was familiar to interview participants and a common theme among union inoculation campaigns. After eliminating duplicates, 137 new documents were collected from interview participants.

Combined, these documents - e-mails, legal filings, social media posts, institutional websites - narrated the role of international graduate students in unionization. In total, 246 administrative documents were collected and analyzed. These documents were relatively evenly distributed by institution, though there are a greater number of documents from the two institutions where interviews were conducted (32 from Washington University and 28 from Penn State University – see Figure 1.1 for breakdown of number of documents by institution).

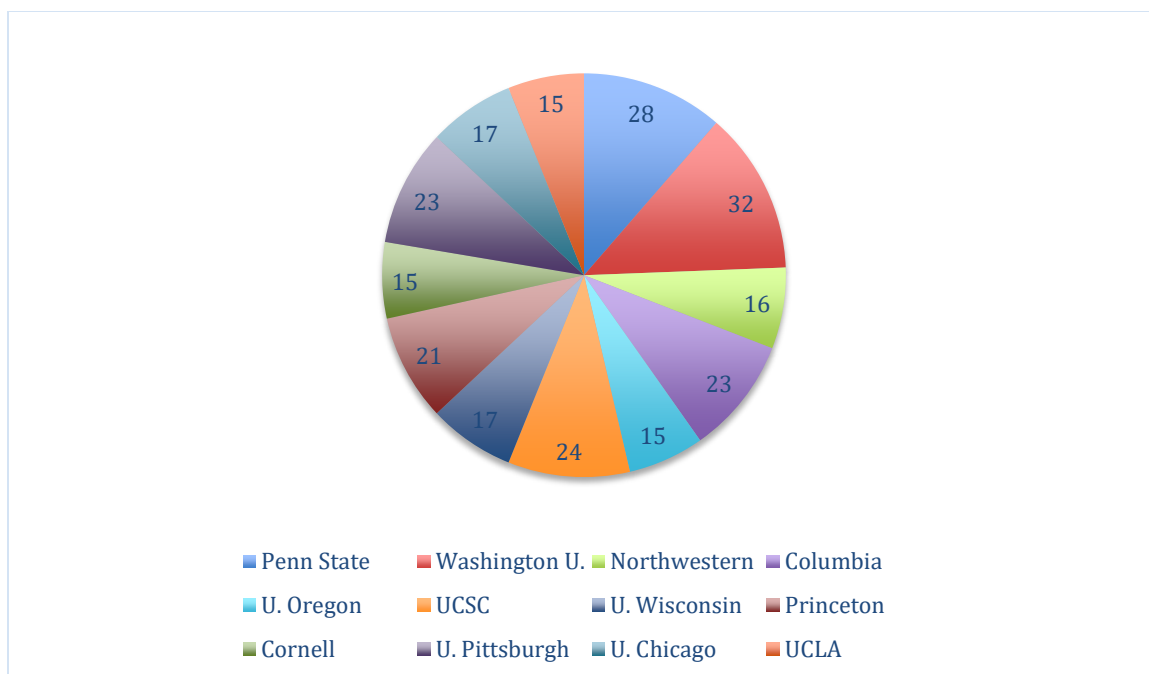


Figure 1-1: Documents by Institution

These documents include website captures, presidential statements, e-mails, several memos from university officials including graduate school deans and provosts, and transcripts from town halls and other public speaking events. The majority of these documents are website page captures. See Figure 2.1 for breakdown by document type. There is remarkable homogeneity among these documents. There are many instances where the exact same words are used across several different universities or exact phrases used repeatedly across one university's communications.

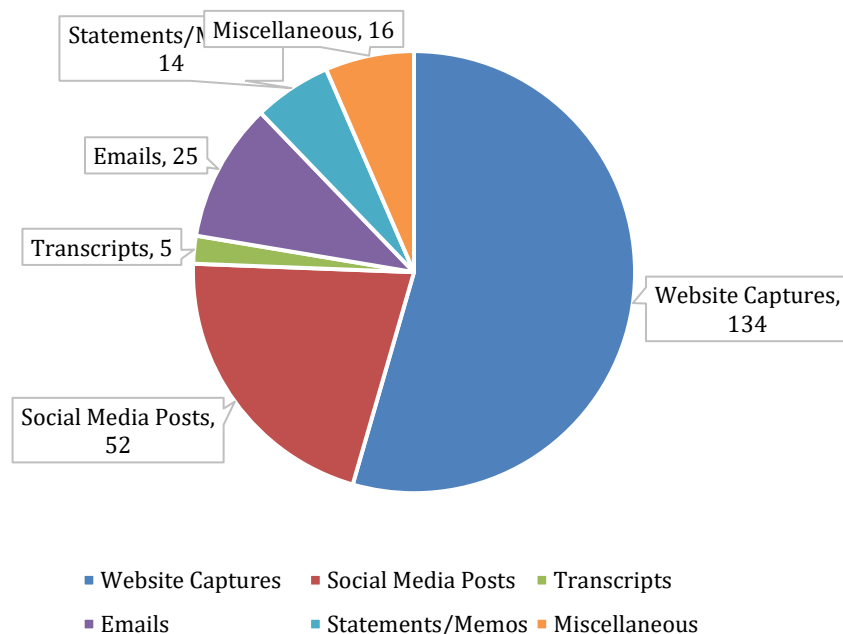


Figure 2-1: Documents by Document Type

Data Analysis

For interview data, analysis began with analytic memos, written immediately after each interview. Analytic memos serve a dual purpose of creating a general narrative about the interview for the researcher and highlighting specific moments (Saldaña, 2016). Guided by Saldaña's (2016) strategies for qualitative data coding, I developed codes based on the research questions and applied these codes as I carefully read through the transcript line by line (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000). At the same time, codes evolved in the research process in response to emergent themes that came from participant responses. In this way, the data analysis process was both inductive and deductive, framed by theory but responsive to details that arose from the data collection process. After all interviews were conducted and transcribed, the collected transcripts were reviewed again.

Document Analysis

The documents included in this study were analyzed using a coding system similar to that used for interviews, with codes responsive to emergent data. However, for document analysis, I applied a series of rubrics to analyze both the structural and thematic elements of the document. The initial rubric noted basic elements such as the source of the document, the topic, the intended audience, the formal or informal nature of the document, and the stance on graduate student work or collective bargaining that is discernable in the text (see Appendix B). However, just as the coding of interview transcripts was an ongoing, iterative process, the coding and analysis of documents was flexible to allow reflection on “the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 44). This reflexive process of analysis allows the researcher to incorporate themes from the data that may not have been anticipated in the original research questions. I revised the initial rubric, resulting in a coding rubric that was sensitive to emergent data, particularly themes of individual/collective and university isolation/social engagement (see Appendix C for the revised coding rubric).

Limitations

This study has certain limitations that are important to note. First, less than half the interview participants were international students. While the international student participants who shared their stories with me provided important insight into relationships between citizenship status and unionization events, much work remains to be done in exploring and centering their experiences. The role of international students in academic labor and graduate student unionization is an important issue that future studies should examine, possibly by focusing exclusively on international student experiences. In

addition, the skew in terms of national origin, with overrepresentation of, for example, Turkey, and underrepresentation of China and Korea, leaves unanswered questions about how national origin frames international student experiences of work and activism.

Future studies that

In addition, I looked exclusively at research-intensive universities. There are strong reasons for this limited scope including the concentration of graduate students overall and international graduate students specifically at that institutional type. However, the union experiences and administrative documents studied here will not necessarily represent the full gamut of unionization experiences in U.S. higher education, which can be highly variable by institutional type and organizational culture.

Another limitation is the focus on public-facing administrative documents in the analysis of administrative framings of graduate student labor and international graduate students. Universities have many communication channels through which they respond to labor relations events, formulate and articulate their responses, and manage stakeholder framings of the events. In-depth methodologies such as ethnography might be used in future research to more thoroughly examine the nuanced way that administrative framings arise and how they are communicated at the individual, departmental, and as well as publicly.

Furthermore, ‘university administration’ is not a monolith. Doubtless, each university labor event at the twelve universities studied had unique aspects, issues, and stakeholders that shaped messaging and behavior. The individual motivations and framings of particular university presidents, provosts, and deans of graduate study are of great interest to scholars of higher education leadership as well as those who study

academic labor. Framed by theories of social movements and organizations, this study emphasized the broad-based examination of the organizational field but what was gained in breadth placed limitations on depth. Future work is needed to understand why university administrations are responding to graduate unionization by targeting international students and how those responses vary by institution.

Positionality

As a current graduate student worker, I have a first-hand understanding of the conditions of graduate work that are the focus of this study. Participants are graduate students or former graduate students with a diverse range of work experiences such as teaching and research assistantships as well as practitioner positions. In the course of my graduate experiences at both the master's and doctoral level, I have engaged in all three types of assistantships. My familiarity with all these types of graduate student work promoted rapport with my participants and shaped my interview questions. On the other hand, I am a native-born U.S. citizen and some (20) of my participants were international graduate students. In interviews, I worked to maintain a reflexive awareness of my positionality and the way it shaped my perceptions and reactions but in particular with international students. I placed particular emphasis on maintaining a flexible interview structure to follow participant lead and center their experiences over my positional pre-conceptions.

Chapter 4: Findings

The results of this study both confirm and extend previous research on graduate student unionization in the academy. In this examination of graduate student union activist experience and administrative response to union activity, I find that conflicting framings of the university are articulated by participants and administrative documents. The contradiction at the heart of these disparate visions of the university and graduate work within it is the tension between the unitary, disconnected ideology of neoliberal individualism and the interconnected, socially embedded, community outlook of social movements. These broad ideological framings translate into themes that delineate along lines of the individual versus the collective and represent contrasting understandings of the university, graduate student workers, and international graduate students specifically. These themes include the critique of the corporate university, the social embeddedness of the ivory tower, and the ineffable individuality of academic work. See Table 3-1 for a summary of thematic findings.

Table 3-1: Summary of Findings

Object of Framing	Union Activists	University Administration
University	Corporatized; Socially Embedded; Framed by Global and National Politics	Apolitical; Individually Unique; Socially Isolated
Graduate Student Workers	Socially Interconnected; Social Movement	Ineffably Individualized; Apprentices
International Graduate Students	Politically Framed; Socially Interconnected	Uniquely Vulnerable; Isolated by Citizenship Status

Critique of Corporate University

Prior studies have suggested that graduate student union movements critique the modern university as fundamentally a corporate, revenue-driven organization (Rhoads &

Rhoades, 2005; Lafer, 2003). Interview participants in this study similarly described their work as a source of money or prestige for their universities and critiqued the university's drive for increased revenue. Their critiques of the university went beyond labor disputes, however, to encompass a broad range of university policies and processes. Mark, a doctoral student nearing graduation at PSU, voiced succinctly what many participants talked about. "However progressive they might claim to be, the university as an institution is very much a business at this point. It's very much an investment vehicle." Adam, a union organizer at WashU, flatly summed up his perception of US universities, "They're all run like businesses and they're all scummy."

Among this group of international and domestic students, there was a sense that their university in particular and higher education institutions in general were driven by profit motives that were in conflict with the educational mission. Furthermore, these perspectives were relationally developed through a series of interactions with faculty and university administration, both in the context of labor relations and elsewhere.

Participants developed, refined, and voiced their critiques of the corporate university through a series of exchanges with administration, receiving institutional messages about systems of value in academia, digesting that message, critiquing it, and contesting it with an alternate framing.

Participants consistently framed their work experiences in the context of a corporatized university. In the interviews, teaching assistants described their teaching work as a kind of rote process that generated tuition dollars for the institution, a process in which they have little mentorship, guidance, or quality control. Daniel, a sociology student from Spain, described the institutional function of his teaching work with some

degree of disillusionment. “I feel like I'm here because these people need somebody to teach this class and have these 30 undergrads sit in this class for three times a week and get graded on it, and they pay the fees and they feel that their money is well spent.”

Similarly, Marie, an English doctoral student, described the conflict between her love of teaching and the pressured and hectic conditions under which she must teach:

I purposefully chose this program because I *wanted* to teach. It's important to me. But to be thrown into the classroom - I'm the instructor of record, from the beginning - with no training, no mentorship, no one to go to when I have questions. I cannot actually teach the way I know I should, effectively, thoughtfully. I am stretched to the limit. It became very clear to me very quickly that I am here to process these students, to generate tuition dollars

Like Daniel, Marie's experience teaching changed her understanding of the purpose of graduate education, reframing her understanding of the university as a fundamentally revenue-seeking organization. This reframed perspective extended beyond their own working conditions and into a broader understanding of the social function of the university.

The question of money generated through teaching and student tuition dollars came up again and again, but participants who had worked primarily as research assistants also framed their work activities as profitable to the institution. Mark, an advanced graduate student in engineering talked about his work in applied research as part of a project that was a “cash cow” for the university. “And I might be a small part of that with the project that I'm working on but it's definitely incredibly profitable for the

university.” He discussed the way that his own research agenda had changed as a result of his department’s pursuit of industry and military partnerships.

I came here with the purpose to study wind energy, thinking about environmental sustainability. But the research I do now, I’m working either directly with the army or with defense contractors. So it's very much stuff that I don't want to do.

But that change happened because of the financial needs of my department.

Mark, like many other participants, experienced his work as a graduate student as a firsthand experience of the corporate academy. However, for Mark and others, this critique was not born exclusively from work experiences but, rather, developed over time from a variety of experiences in the university.

In the course of their graduate study, participants developed a new perspective on the university and the function of their work within it. They described a variety of experiences that were influential in the formation of this new understanding of the university as fundamentally corporate and revenue-driven. These experiences included their work and unionization efforts but extended beyond that to sexual harassment policies, stance on immigration policies, response to Black Lives Matter movements on campus, protections for academic freedom. Nathan talked about how he went through several stages of refiguring his understanding of the academy.

It wasn’t just a labor dispute, no. I’m an economist so, I think by training I have some sympathy for the administration in that sense. There were issues beyond that, a recklessness with COVID safety, for example. Willful inaction on racial justice and equity issues on campus.

For some participants, like Nathan, the experiences that shaped their disillusionment were quite broad, creating a general sense of the university as an unfeeling bureaucracy and exploitative organization. Other participants spoke about individual experiences that were turning points for them. Sofia, a biology doctoral student from Serbia, described how she experienced sexual harassment within her program and learned about the dysfunctions of the university as she struggled to navigate the process of reporting and addressing sexual harassment. Starting with what she described as a naive faith in the institutional processes, she followed the textbook procedures for reporting only to find at each step of the process that the university at every level worked to protect itself rather than address the problem

They don't say we recognize we have a problem. They will say things like, "We take a strong stand against this issue." In this case, sexual harassment. But they want to be in control of the narrative. They don't want to lose control of that. They don't want to invite external parties in to see the degree of the damage, that has been done or the degree of the mismanagement or the degree of negligence.

The graduate student workers in this study had different types of experiences, personal or collective. Some experienced organizational dysfunction at the level of their university and its sociopolitical commitments, others at the level of individual harassment and/or discrimination. However, despite the many forms these experiences took, each participant traced back the problems and injustices of their higher education experience back to the corporatized university, to the academic drive toward prestige and accumulated wealth. While previous research has established that graduate student unions engage in a critique of academic corporatization through collective rhetoric (Rhoades & Rhoads, 2005; Lafer,

2003; Gilbert, 2013; Tirelli, 2014), this study demonstrates that such critiques are rooted in firsthand experience and developed in conversation with university policy, action, and messaging.

The critique of the corporate academy voiced by participants wasn't a straightforward consequence of a conflict over labor or a strategy for achieving a labor-related goal but, rather, a response to institutional actions and messaging. Across two different institutions, one public and one private, across academic discipline and citizenship status, these union activist graduate students talked about how they came to reframe their understanding of their university and US higher education more broadly through an interactive process, responding to experiences and university messaging. In the course of their graduate study, participants developed a new perspective on the university and the function of their work within it. They described a variety of experiences that were influential in the formation of this new understanding of the university as fundamentally corporate and revenue-driven. These experiences included their work and unionization efforts but extended beyond that to sexual harassment policies, stance on immigration policies, response to Black Lives Matter movements on campus, protections for academic freedom.

Participants described a process of disillusionment that gradually changed their understanding of the university. Sara, a PSU English doctoral student, talked about her experiences as a union activist within her department, where she was surprised at the discouragement she received from the dean and other leaders in her department:

That was extremely frustrating for me to find out that this department that I thought was safe did not actually have my best interest. They were more interested in making sure that the university administration didn't try to retaliate. It definitely made me lose faith in the upper administration in my department. And it made me lose faith in the university administration as a whole, in terms of doing anything that would even remotely improve the working, living conditions, and university experience of graduate assistants.

She went on to connect her experience with broader problems of academic freedom, asking, “If they don’t stand up for their grad assistants, do they stand up for other issues?” For Sara and others, direct experience was an occasion for learning and for placing the university in the broader context beyond labor issues. Zhang pinpointed the moment when she began seeing the university as a self-interested organization at international student orientation:

One of my first disillusioning moments of the university as a benevolent force was at orientation session. We sat in a hall for international student orientation and they had us all stand up in order of what countries we were from. And 80% of that room was from China. It was disproportionate.

For Zhang, this moment was a starting point from which she began to question to what extent her interests were aligned with the university’s goals. Among the international students who participated in this study, Zhang’s story was highly representative: beginning with a high level of faith in the university as a more or less altruistic institution dedicated to preparing its students and evolving into a more critical understanding of the

university as a business. Aadya, a neuroscience student from India, experienced this shift in perspective after speaking to her faculty supervisor about her excessive workload. Rather than finding resources to address the problem, her supervisor outlined the risks of changing her assignment, saying (as she quoted them in the interview), “I know that as an international student things can be tricky.” Aadya understood this to be a veiled threat, that if she complained about her work, her visa status might be threatened.

And I did, I felt a lump in my throat. But also, did he forget that I am a scholar, a researcher? Did he think I would take that as a gullible person? Yes, I immediately started to see things differently. This is when I said, I need some help and it will not be from my department.

This experience set Aadya on a path that ultimately led to her participation in the unionization efforts, a space in which she saw that her individual experience was connected to a broader pattern of dysfunction and exploitation. For some union activists, these moments of disillusionment were key in recruiting members. Adam talked about how talking to fellow graduate students about the various ways the university was complicit with corporate and political stakeholders to the detriment of its students and community.

And I really relished watching that moment of realization that people have when they realize that a university doesn't have their best interests in mind. Because a lot of people think that way. I think a lot of people still have that romanticized idea of the university being this bastion of learning and this fortress of moral judgment or whatever.

In the course of the 51 interviews, all the participants referenced some action of university administrative leaders that changed the way they understood the university and the purpose of their work within it. For many students this process unfolded over a series of interactions with university administration and occasionally department administration. For many participants, these experiences are part of their personal narrative describing how they came to be active in the unionization movement. During the campaign for unionization, participants had more extensive interactions with university deans, provosts, and presidents, were more attuned to institutional messaging about graduate students, their work, learning, and contributions to the institution. They came away from these interactions with more nuanced critical perspectives on the university. In the interviews they described an iterative process through which they learned to reframe institutional action within a broader understanding of the economic and political motives of complex, resource-dependent organizations. For several participants, the experience led them to abandon an academic career path, one even left their degree program before finishing their degree.

In the interview data in this study, the critique of the corporatized university is evident throughout. Participants pointed out the multi-million dollar salaries of administrators and athletic coaches as akin to the high pay of corporate CEOs while their rank and file workers live on subsistence wages. At PSU, a public university, some participants acknowledged that declining state funding might contribute to austerity measures but argued that budget cuts in their university happened primarily at the level of the least powerful members of the university community, graduate student workers, adjunct faculty, and staff. One participant commented sarcastically on the president's

salary, “The union’s not good for the bottom line but Barron’s 1.2 million is ok, right?” However, the administrative documents never once reference budget constraints or resource dependence as a reason for opposing unionization or in their responses to labor actions. Of course, as an educational organization, it is not likely that they would publicly proclaim corporate ties or admit that changing funding streams necessitate the adjunctification of their workforce. However, there is no language at all about financial sustainability or budgetary considerations in the administrative responses to union action. The overwhelming message is that economic and financial factors are not a consideration in university stance on graduate student unions. Financial language and figures are only discussed in relationship to graduate student stipends, locating such considerations firmly at the level of the individual student.

Individual and Collective Framings

The findings from this study extend the critique of academic corporatization to develop our understanding of the ideological stakes that are at play in the conflict between union activists and university administration. Union activists and administrative statements are articulating two fundamentally distinct understandings of academic work and the university. The activists interviewed in this study emphasize the collective and interconnected nature of their work, emphasizing collective interests across academic disciplines and building alliances among undergraduate students, faculty, staff, and community members. By contrast, administrative statements frame graduate student work as highly individualized, incompatible with collective networks, and characterized by sharp distinctions along the lines of citizenship status, academic discipline, and individual institution. In one framing, both the worker and the organization can only be understood

and evaluated in isolation. In the other, the organization has to be understood in the social context and the student understood in conjunction with the broader community of university stakeholders. These differences create two major categories of reframing: the nature of graduate student work and, by extension academic work in general, and the positioning of the university within the social and political landscape. These different ways of understanding the university go beyond differences of opinion in a labor dispute to demonstrate fundamentally different framings of the university and academic work.

The Ineffable Individuality of Graduate Student Work

One of the most striking contrasts between the university documents examined in this study and the narratives of union activists who were interviewed is the way graduate student work is represented. It makes sense that this would be the most profound and immediately obvious difference, considering that the focus of the unionization disputes is the definition of graduate student work and their status as employees or apprentices. Administrative documents insist on the unique nature of academic work, the isolation of the academy, and insist on an individualized view of graduate student learning. In one typical example, a dean of the graduate school at University of Chicago argued that the collective orientation of unions was fine for other work settings but detrimental for graduate students, asserting “this approach will limit the individual experience graduate students currently enjoy.” At another university, the university president made a similar argument against unionization, citing the individualized nature of graduate education. “Our programs are tailored to the individual students within them.” The rhetoric among the 12 institutions examined in this study was remarkably consistent across document type as well as institutional characteristics (public, private, geographic region, etc). In

addition to describing the material benefits enjoyed by the university's graduate student workers (often compared favorably to other institutions) these documents consistently emphasized the individual nature of graduate education. Consider this example from Columbia University's website, part of a "Frequently Asked Questions" section designed to address potential questions about unionization.

Q: What if an individual student objected to a provision in the labor contract?

Would he or she still be bound by it?

A: Yes. Collective bargaining is, by definition, collective in nature. This measure that the union speaks and acts for all students in the bargaining unit, and the provisions in the labor contract it negotiates apply to all unit members, unless exceptions and differences are provided for explicitly in the contract

In almost identical language, the University of Chicago website warns against the dangers of the collective nature of union labor negotiations:

Q: What if an individual graduate student objected to a provision in the labor contract? Would he or she still be bound by it?

A: Yes. Collective bargaining is, as it sounds, collectivist in nature. This means that the union speaks and acts for all graduate students in the bargaining unit, and the provisions in the labor contract it negotiates apply to all unit members, unless exceptions and differences are provided for in the contract.

Each university included in the document analysis portion of the study that was responding to a graduate student unionization movement had a document similar to this, a FAQ designed to answer hypothetical questions about unionization. In all of these documents, coming from 7 of the 12 universities in the study, the collective nature of

union negotiations and action was represented as a threat to the fundamentally individual nature of graduate student work. Unions, these universities argue, would impose homogenizing, standardized approach onto the ineffably individual and heterogeneous nature of graduate education. In a town hall held by the Penn State University to address the unionization movement, Provost Nicholas Jones emphasized the individualized nature of graduate education:

University leadership and its faculty have expressed many times that we have always viewed our graduate students as *individuals* who have come to Penn State as students seeking advanced degrees, not as employees who came for a job. As a premier research university, the hallmark of graduate education at Penn State is the individualized training each of you receives and your unique one-on-one relationships with faculty advisors.

To the extent to which messages like this acknowledge relationships, they are specific types of relationships, hierarchical relationships between students and faculty or international students and administrative offices, not lateral or collective relationships between and among graduate students, between departments, or interconnected relationships among students, staff, and community members.

The theme of the individual, unique nature of academic work and learning was by far the most commonly identified theme among the 246 documents analyzed. However, the concept of collegiality was also invoked at least once among the documents collected from each institution. Previous studies have shown that collegiality is a highly subjective term that is often deployed in faculty work evaluation (Johnston et al., 2013). Although in the context of faculty evaluation the term has a highly variable definition, it typically

implies some sort of productive orientation toward the scholarly community, and thus might suggest a collaborative or communal aspect to these administrative statements. However, collegiality in these statements indicates something highly individualized and implies a relationship sharply limited to that between faculty and graduate students. In a March 15, 2017 letter addressed to graduate students, Princeton Dean of the Graduate School Sanjeev R. Kulkarni invoked collegiality in this sense, while simultaneously emphasizing the individualized nature of the university's approach to graduate students:

We do our best not to rely on one-size-fits-all solutions, while at the same time we are able to quickly and nimbly make changes that improve benefits and resources for all of our students. If a union were to be approved at Princeton, any resulting contract would be binding on all AIs and ARs, as well as on all faculty who interact with students in their roles as AIs and ARs. The existence of a union would change the nature of the collegial and individualized relationship that exists here between faculty and their students, and it would change the nature of the relationship between graduate students and the University.

This type of statement, that both underlines the individual nature of graduate work and upholds unionization as a threat to faculty-student relationships, is evident in documents from every institution included in the study. At universities where there was an existing graduate student union and the administrative documents address contract negotiations or labor actions, the framing of graduate student work shifts to include an individualized vision of the work but also a community-wide impact of work stoppages and other labor actions. In February 2020, graduate student workers at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) went on strike. UCSC administrative responses to this labor action took

two, somewhat contradictory, approaches: consistently repeating that the question of graduate worker compensation was highly individualized and, at the same time, placing graduate student labor relations at the center of the community. In defending the university decision to escalate police presence on campus and arrest several protesting graduate students on strike, Chancellor Cynthia Larive reasoned:

But I am duty bound as chancellor to provide a safe environment for our students, our community, and yes our protestors — to ensure that we protect free expression while protecting our community as they attend classes, go to doctors' appointments, and take their children to school.

Graduate student work and their activism are here framed as embedded in a campus community. Community, in this framing, includes undergraduate grades and course credit, which are delayed or refused by the process of labor negotiations. In general, the university responses to labor actions are more varied and more complicated, emphasizing individual level compensation but emphasizing the ways in which graduate work is embedded in the community when considering the impacts of work stoppage.

While administrative stances on graduate student work frame conflicts in labor relations as concerned chiefly, if not exclusively, with individual level factors such as stipend amounts, graduate union activists describe a very different set of concerns that frame their unionization movement. The graduate student participants were familiar with the administrative focus on material, individual level compensation, engaged that rhetoric in their narratives, countering it with a framing of their work as key to social justice, both on campus and within the broader social context. By far the majority of participants in this study reported positive work experiences at the individual level. The key issues

emphasized in administrative documents, stipend amounts, tuition waivers, faculty relationships, were points on which most participants were quite satisfied. A contrast of administrative representations and participant experiences reveals the fundamental disagreement about the key issues in labor disputes.

Collective Framings of Graduate Student Work

While administrative documents emphasized individual level rewards to argue against union demands or unionization movements, the participants in this study came to labor activism despite positive experiences at the individual level. One participant, when asked why she became active in the union responded, “Not really because of my working conditions - which, I’m pretty lucky, because of my advisor but really I saw them at all the protests and events that were important to me and I thought I should join.” Nicole, a 4th year doctoral student at WashU, directly engaged the idea that the unionization movement was primarily a means of addressing wage and benefit issues:

We’ve heard a lot about how our stipends are generous and, sure, mine is fine. My PI is awesome, actually, and I’m happy. That’s not why we need a union. The university has shown me that it’s not trustworthy in regulating itself. We need a union to tip the scales. It’s like checks and balances.

Nicole succinctly expresses a sentiment shared by many participants at both universities: unionization for them is an act of solidarity that is meant to lead to a grassroots coalition, centered around the labor of graduate students but extending across campus and community, to limit centralized administrative power. This type of coalition is incredibly important to the activists in this study because of the misuse of administrative power they have identified in a number of arenas. Jason, a WashU student in both the law school and

the graduate school talked about how he joined the union movement after serving on a campus committee to improve the university sexual harassment response protocol.

First off, the university has a terrible track record. That's why I got on the committee in the first place - because I know it's a problem. The process is - you can choose to go through Title IX through the university or you could go to the police. Only the police are often connected to the university in some way. And so either way the university's reputation and interests come first. When I pointed this out on the committee, I was all but laughed out of the room. I realized there needs to be a union, an external grievance process that could lead to proper legal process.

Participants identified inequality in organizational processes at the university or ways in which the university contributed to injustice in the community as their primary reasons for seeking an external check on administrative power through unionization.

Out of the 51 participants, only 6 had significantly negative work experiences in their assistantships (sexual harassment, exploitation, verbal abuse, significant hours beyond their contract), and even those 6 participants described their personal, individual experiences as only a partial component of the reasons they had for joining and promoting the unionization drive. No participants talked about their individual level of financial compensation as the primary reason for unionization, though they did speak more broadly about low wages for non-academic staff on campus. It is important to note that all 6 of the participants who reported significant negative issues in their working conditions were international students. Several of these international students who became interested in the union because of their working conditions, continued and

expanded their participation in the union drive through engagement in activism beyond their own working conditions.

Collective Framings of the University

When the interview participants talked about their work and unionization activities they almost always framed them within the institutional context, understanding their work as it relates to the broader campus community and, for most participants, as it relates to much broader social issues. In their stories about their work and interactions with university administration, they presented a framing of the university that reflected their understanding of the university as fundamentally embedded within communities and interconnected with social issues. They situate their own work as politically and socially significant and approach unionization as a way to shift the fundamentally corporatized agenda of the university and create institutional action to further social justice. In this process, they situated the university within the context of national movements for racial justice, economic inequality in the local community, and relationships to federal and state policy. Interview participants rejected the idea of the university as an ivory tower, disconnected from social issues and political turmoil, a trope which one participant explicitly rejected, commenting that administration was “pushing the old academic ivory tower idea, which nobody believes.” Fundamentally, union activists insisted on seeing the ways in which their university existed as a social actor. This positioning of the university places demands for action in various arenas, particularly racial justice, addressing inequality in the local community, and supporting immigrants and international students.

In particular, union activists insisted on the ways that the university was responding to national politics and responsible for the local community. Rosa, a PSU

student, pointed out that the timing of the university's heavy-handed anti-union rhetoric corresponded with shifts in national politics.

Rosa: I think this would have gone down very differently if not for the [2016] election.

LC: You mean in terms of the NLRB?

Rosa: Well, maybe that - though that's less important for us. But, no, it's just become more acceptable since the Trump era - to threaten non-citizens, to be openly union busting, to twist the truth when you talk about the law. The Trump era has emboldened some of our worst tendencies and PSU just is not immune to that.

At both universities, participants named the national political climate as an influence on university administration. They also critiqued their respective universities for their exploitation of or negative influence in the local community. At WashU, Amanda pointed out the connections between the university's role in the community and the shooting of Mike Brown:

Mike Brown's death kind of sparked like a - kind of shined a light, I guess, on the divisions that are in St Louis. St. Louis is one of the most segregated cities in the United States and WashU is a big contributor to that division. WashU is not well liked by a lot of community members.

Though Amanda didn't arrive at WashU until several years after Mike Brown's shooting, in her narrative describing her work both as a graduate student worker and as an activist she draws clear connections between her experience, decades of racialized gentrification in St. Louis, and university-community relationships. Her framing of the university as

well as her work within it refutes barriers of academic and urban, of union and social movement. From her perspective, and that of all the union activists at this institution, WashU is a social actor, creating social conditions in the city of St. Louis that play a major role in national-level movements for racial justice. This participant and others described a process of gentrification by which WashU had solidified and sustained the racial segregation of St. Louis, which contributed to the racial profiling and police violence experienced by Black members of the community, including Michael Brown. Furthermore, many participants at both WashU and PSU criticized their university's response (or lack of response) to racist violence within the local community. Anja, who talked about her experience working in public schools in St. Louis, described the kinds of conflicts she experienced representing the university as the community was the focus of a national movement for racial justice:

I mean - here we are, and I'm out in the community, working, and Ferguson is the focus of a movement, but from WashU? Nothing. People in the community are asking me, 'Where's WashU? What are they doing about this?' and I'm like - nothing. They are pretending like it isn't happening.

Anja experienced an acute sense of the ways that her work and study as a graduate student was linked, or should be linked, to the Black Lives Matter movement. She described feeling complicit in the university's inaction and for its contributions to racial segregation in the city. She questioned, "What am I doing here? Am I guilty by association? I had to do something to change things at the university." For this participant, and most of the participants in the study, solidarity through unionization was

a way to shift the university's behavior, leveraging labor to force the administration to take action for social justice.

At PSU, though the community context was different, the same dynamics between union and community social movement were evident in the narratives shared in the interviews. While not the focus of a national movement, the community here experienced the death of a young Black man at the hands of police, a tragedy that sparked a local movement for racial justice. Caleb, a doctoral student, spoke about his involvement with the 3/20 Coalition, a community-based movement for racial justice, and how it connected to his involvement with the union.

It was frustrating how the university kept acting like it was a town problem, not a university problem. How are you separate from racism in the community when you just about define this community? Meanwhile we have faculty and students talking about the racism they experience on campus. These things are not disconnected.

Caleb was actively involved in actions for racial justice in both the 3/20 Coalition and the union, understanding the union as a productive space to reframe the university and push administration toward an anti-racist orientation.

In addition to framing the university within the context of community, nation, and global politics, interview participants defined the boundaries of the union beyond their campus and beyond graduate students, seeking alliances and solidarity with graduate students across the nation in multi-union affiliation and including undergraduate workers and staff in their actions. The union at WashU, WUGWU, organized a campaign for higher wages for non-academic staff on campus, successfully campaigning for a \$15 an

hour minimum across campus. These actions weren't a matter of accidental timing or strategic solidarity but, rather, a systematic approach to the university that was at the heart of participants' activism. Amanda summed up what was, to her, the main benefit of her union participation:

What WUGWU's strived to do is really be more community focused. We always make sure community members are invited to our actions. Like the actions for COVID safety tonight, from what I've heard a whole bunch of community members that are planning on attending. Things like that are really important in the context of WUGWU's organizing, too. I think we really prioritize the impact of, and maybe make WashU think about their impact on the community. That's not something the administration wants to do. Or they think it's all good, which it's not. People are telling us it's not.

In these ways, graduate student union activists are redefining the boundaries of labor, the university, and turning a labor relations dispute into a social movement. For international students, the union provided an introduction to important social issues with which they were previously unfamiliar. Lucas, an international student at WashU commented, "At first I didn't understand - why are we marching for Black Lives Matter? Why are we occupying campus for the staff wages? But I decided eventually that it all matters. We are showing solidarity. We are changing the way the university sees us." For the union activists, the campus, local, and global community are inextricably connected. They work to build solidarity across these struggles and collective strength among people who are marginalized in various ways. More importantly, they choose to address these issues through the union because they see labor solidarity as a lever to shift the resources and

influence of the university to create social change. They dispute administrative rhetoric that insists on the unique, individualized nature of academic work or the university as fundamentally removed from politics. For participants at both universities, the urgency of social injustice motivated their participation in the union in ways that weren't directly connected to their working conditions and wages, but, rather, as a group that, through solidarity, could reframe the university as an organization situated and influential in the community.

The Ivory Tower: Individual Framings of the University

Administrative documents situate the university quite differently. In documents addressing unionization movements or labor negotiations with existing unions, there is not a single instance where the administration acknowledges the union's demands on behalf of the community or recognizes the connections that union leaders make between labor and social justice. By far the prevailing theme is the individualized nature not only of graduate work, but the unique and isolated nature of that particular university. The administrative documents analyzed in this study were remarkably similar across institutions, though insisting on the uniqueness of the particular university from which they originated. Documents from 11 of the 12 universities in the study argued against the usefulness of a graduate student union or invalidated union demands in negotiation by invoking the phrase 'tradition of excellence,' implying that this university, perhaps uniquely, is founded on a particular set values and traditions that generate prestige and academic excellence. These traditions, according to the documents, are incompatible with collective approaches. At least one document from each of the twelve institutions studied referenced "peer institutions," comparing the stipend amounts and benefits of their

graduate student workers favorably to those in other institutions. To the extent that administrative documents are depicting their institution as embedded in a community or social context, it is one peopled by other universities that they consider peers. Even within this context, however, the documents make sharp distinctions, insisting on the distinctive character of their institution. For example, an excerpt from the FAQ from Northwestern University's website objects to the notion that graduate student unions would be compatible with graduate student there since they are well established at other universities:

Northwestern prides itself on a long tradition of individually tailored graduate education and strong faculty-student mentorships that are a unique feature of our education.

Similarly, at the University of Chicago, Provost Daniel Diermeier proclaimed in an open letter to the campus community that, "Unionization would fundamentally alter the decentralized, faculty-led approach to graduate education that has long been a hallmark of the University of Chicago." The resounding message from all 12 institutions is that graduate student unions might work well for other types of employees, other industries, even other universities, but aspects of organizational saga and culture at their unique institution make unions incompatible with graduate education.

There are numerous examples of verbatim or near verbatim duplication of language in administrative documents originating from universities where a unionization movement was underway. This remarkable homogeneity was evident despite differences in regional location, institutional type (private or public), and ultimate outcome of the unionization vote. In some cases, different universities had hired the same law firm to

represent them in the labor dispute (as in the case of Penn State and University of Pittsburgh) and that shared representation might be a mechanism of directly shared rhetoric. However, for the most part, these universities are not represented by the same firms and the trend of identical language had to have come about through more indirect means.

International Students as Uniquely Vulnerable

The same themes of individual and collective framings that are evident in the administrative and union activists' representations of graduate student work and the university shape the representations of international students and their role in labor relations. Just as administrative rhetoric in public-facing documents concerning GSUs underlines the unique, individualized nature of academic labor, documents addressing international students emphasize their "unique needs" and the necessity of "case by case assessment of needs" in light of cultural transitions and visa requirements. Just as rhetoric that critiques unions as specifically ill-suited to academic work, administrative documents that are addressed to international students suggest that they are or would be distinctly disadvantaged or ill-suited to collective strategies associated with unions (presumably as compared to domestic graduate students, though this is never made explicit). Administrative documents frame international graduate students as vulnerable assets, whose status in this country is precarious. One letter from the provost's office at Washington University stated somewhat ambiguously, "Universities are legally required to report to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement...if a student fails to maintain status." In a similar vein, a list of union facts on the Princeton University website states, "No union has the ability to prevent the US Government from denying visas or work

permits or deporting international students.” During the 2020 graduate student worker strike at the University of California, Santa Cruz, the office of International Student and Scholar Services sent an e-mail out to international students with a list of facts about the strike. Included with a number of other points about when and where the strike would take place, it warns: “actions that result in student discipline or arrest may have immigration consequences, both on our current status and on possible future immigration applications you may make in the United States.” In each of these statements, ambiguity is deployed to avoid specific commitment to action while the specter of deportation is brought forward as a threat. The overwhelming message from each of these documents that specifically addresses international students is that their safety and success is best guarded by university administration, which is situated to support the unique circumstances of international students.

International Students: Interconnected and in Political Context

Just as interview participants understood the university as interconnected with the broader political and social context in other issues, they framed administrative targeting of international graduate student workers as complicit with national and global politics. Participants frequently linked administrative framing of international students to Trump-era immigration policies that, as one participant phrased it, ‘called up xenophobic ideas to divide us and hang on to power.’ Every international student interviewed mentioned Trump-era policies that threatened their legal status in the U.S. as important to the context of their unionization attempts. Emre, a Turkish graduate student at WashU was moved to join the union by what he perceived as deceptive representations from the university:

Almost immediately after I got here, there is a new president in the US and all these anti-immigration - Muslim ban, build the wall, on and on. And at almost the same time, we are voting, or getting ready to vote, for the union and the university president, the provost sent messages like, 'Oh, you may be vulnerable. Better not unionize, you may get deported' and I'm so mad at this! You are taking advantage of this bad situation for us. I *do* feel vulnerable. It *is* precarious but you are using this politics to scare me and I will not be scared.

For the international student participants in this study, the threatening rhetoric from university administration was part of their motivation for joining the union. However, they acknowledged that the messages were effective at intimidating many other international graduate students, deterring union participation, and ultimately contributed to the failed union vote. Adam, whose home country was Malaysia, explained that as he attempted to recruit other international graduate students to the union, he frequently encountered fears that they would experience retaliation from their home governments.

Our governments have laws that prevent us from not just taking part in political processes like voting and whatnot but also being involved in politics in vague terms which is why a lot of, I think a lot of international students shy away from political activism. Because their home governments explicitly forbid it in vague terms, which in a lot of countries is kind of scary. They say you cannot be politically active. That's a very vague term. And then you're like, well, can I get people to vote? Can I join protests? Where is that line? And then oftentimes that line doesn't really exist.

Domestic and international students alike acknowledged that administrative rhetoric targeting international students was influential but argued that it also solidified resistance for some. Noah, a leader in the WashU union pointed out the complicated response to this rhetoric:

Noah: That, of course, did instill a lot of fear in people. Why wouldn't it with Trump in office, and all the mass ICE raids, Muslim bans... Nevertheless, people knew they had to fight back and were fighting back. Those statements have moved too many people to hostility.

LC: You mean among international students, you don't think those statements deterred them from participating in union actions?

Noah: Right, certainly for some, maybe even most. But it also had the opposite effect where international grads were absolutely outraged that they would be singled out in that way.

Significantly, both domestic and international graduate students framed the administrative rhetoric and international student response in the context of politics but did so in different ways. Domestic graduate students tended to frame the issue as connected to the Trump administration policies while international graduate students took a more global perspective, encompassing both US political climate and policies from their home country. While the public-facing administrative documents continually isolate specific groups of students within uniquely situated institutions, insisting on the superiority of a case-by-case approach to graduate education, union participants emphasize connections, community, and interrelated issues.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate the ways that bottom-up and top-down ideological framings develop and interact in a labor conflict. While university administrators and union activists certainly assign values and definitions to key roles and events (such as academic work, community relations, university decisions, working conditions) in instrumental ways, to further their interests or support public or legal arguments for their side of the conflict, this study demonstrates that the framing extends beyond that, organized by contrasting schemas of interpretation. For example, the individualistic lens applied to graduate student labor in university rhetoric is built on an institutional logic that also colors representations of the university itself. In the administrative documents examined in this study, just as graduate students and their labor are incompatible with collective strategies of unions, the university itself is an isolated, ivory tower, disconnected from social relations. By contrast, the interconnected and collectivist framing of union activists sees graduate student working conditions as intertwined with the labor of other workers and likewise emphasizes the shared interests rather than the differences between international and domestic graduate students. Their framing insists on the connections between individuals as well as connections between organizations and society. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that these framings develop dialectically. Graduate student activists developed notions of the university over time through interactions with university rhetoric, policies, and through their own working conditions. Many invested their time in the union movement out of a need to articulate and enact an alternate understanding of academic work and the social role of the university. Each of these schemas of interpretation are comprehensive, in that that

extends beyond one particular facet of the organization or issue and demonstrates themes across subject. At the broadest level, they also reflect changes in US higher education, reflecting the growing neoliberal influence on US universities as well as the grassroots efforts to dismantle this construction of education and its social role.

Critique of Corporate University

Graduate student union activist participants pushed back against administrative framings of their work by pointing out dissonance between the words and actions of their respective universities, describing the hypocrisy of an organization that refuses to assign an economic value to their labor (by insisting on the label ‘apprentice’ over ‘employee’) while commodifying that labor to the greatest extent. Participants quickly linked this contradiction to their framing of the university as corporate, as ‘run like a business.’ Many graduate students contrast their own valuation and investment in their work with the hasty utilitarian value assigned by the university. Many, particularly those engaged in teaching assistantships, expressed frustration at the organizational framing of their work, which forced them to rates of productivity that made authenticity, learning, or creativity impossible. Another way this corporate critique was expressed was the accusation of administrative greed, either by prioritizing tuition revenue over learning, exploitation of international students, or through financially motivated collaborations with industry.

Graduate students’ characterization of their university as market-driven and exploitative mirrors the characteristics of the “neoliberal university.” Neoliberalism is defined broadly by researchers and theorists as a social and economic trend toward privatization and increasing market-orientation (Giroux, 2014). Harvey (2005) described

the fundamental principles of neo- liberalism in terms of individual-state relations and how freedoms are defined:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (p. 2)

From a neoliberal ideology, though governments, organizations, and policy-makers may rhetorically value non-monetary factors such as education, academic freedom, or innovation, in practice they prioritize revenue. “This bears witness to the practical effects of a neoliberal set of values whereby ‘equality, liberty, inclusion, and constitutionalism are now subordinate to the project of economic growth, competitive positioning, and capital enhancement’ (Brown, 2015, p. 26). In higher education, this translates into a value system that prioritizes tuition dollars, prestige and rankings, grantseeking, and other forms of revenue generation while de-prioritizing student learning, education for the public good, and other factors that are not directly connected to revenue generation (Ball, 2012). Graduate student participants in this study simultaneously identify the financial motivations behind the administrative framing of their work while pointing out the hypocrisy of university rhetoric that simultaneously denies the economic value of their work while focusing on the unionization movement as solely an issue of pay. Union activists frame their labor activism differently, as a redistribution of organizational power, necessary “checks and balances,” as one participant put it, on otherwise

unregulated administrative control. Participants contrasted the market-drive of the university with the social justice agenda of their union organization and advocated for change in the organization by leveraging their labor. The tension between these competing framings demonstrates the ways in which neoliberal ideology is both inhabited and contested in higher education today.

Individualistic vs. Collectivist Perspectives

The thread of neoliberal thought and activist resistance to it runs throughout the ideological framing of both graduate students and administrative rhetoric. At the heart of many contrasting understandings of the academy, various stakeholders within the academy, and the work and learning processes that go on within it is a conflict between individualistic and collectivist perspectives. This conflict applies to both individuals (graduate student workers, international students, undergraduate students, university staff, etc.) and to the university as a whole. From the administrative documents examined in this study, the message is clear that differences between individuals and differences between their institution and others are paramount over commonalities. Collective approaches, such as unionization and collective bargaining, are, from this perspective, incompatible with academic work. The ideological framing in these documents places each university, each industry, each individual in a distinct box, disconnected from others and characterizes attempts to find collective interests as impossible in the face of the ineffable unique nature of their subjective experience. This emphasis on the individual over collectivist viewpoints is a key characteristic of neoliberal ideology.

The Isolated Academy: Individualized Framing of the University

The conflict identified in this study over the community and social role of the university, with graduate student activists insisting on the interconnectedness of their university and administrators emphasizing an ‘ivory tower’ rhetoric, echoes the intense private and individualized ideology of neoliberalism. Giroux (2014) urged educators to resist the neoliberal push to diminish the public purpose of education:

One of the crucial challenges faced by educators is rejecting the neoliberal collapse of the public into the private, the rendering of all social problems as biographical in nature. The neoliberal obsession with the private not only furthers a market-based politics that reduces all relationships to the exchange of money and the accumulation of capital, it also depoliticizes politics itself and reduces public activity to the realm of utterly privatized practices (p. 47).

In line with this ideology, university administrative rhetoric denies the interconnected, public role of the university, insisting on divisions between the campus and the surrounding community. By contrast, graduate student activists interviewed in this study push back against this depoliticized version of the university, consistently pointing out the role the university plays in, for example, racial segregation in the local community or complicity with xenophobic national politics. This effort to dismantle the disconnectedness of the ivory tower among union activists is consistent across the two universities from which participants were drawn. In addition, both international and domestic students emphasized the political embeddedness of their university and critiqued the attempts of their universities to ignore or downplay social and political connections. Union activists are framing the university as more than simply an employer

but, rather, as a social actor. This framing is connected to the way they understand their union - as more than a labor organization but, rather, as a space of solidarity that facilitates organizational and social change.

Individual Framings of Graduate Student Workers

This same logic of fundamental individualization applies to how the university characterizes graduate student workers and international students. Like institutions marooned on an academic island and disconnected from politics and community crisis, graduate students and their work are profoundly disconnected from each other and from other campus stakeholders. Every institution included in this study stated in some form the unique and individualized nature of graduate student work. The argument that collective bargaining is at odds with academic work, of course, is strategic in that it justifies administrative opposition to unionization or labor actions on some basis other than the financial. However, aside from being a useful argument, it is also one that is fundamentally aligned with neoliberal ideology. The vision of neoliberal education relies on “the creation of atomized individuals who live in a moral vacuum and regress to sheer economics” (Giroux, 2014, p. 47). In light of this ideology, it is unsurprising that administrative statements about labor actions frame the conflict as a question of adequate stipends rather than one concerned with organizational dysfunction, inequality in the university, and social justice. As atomized individuals, graduate student activists insist they have no protections from university exploitation. By contrast, university administrators claim graduate students and their work are fundamentally incompatible with collectivism, that academic work is so highly individualized that solidarity among workers on the basis of their labor would be detrimental to the students themselves.

Union activists were aware of this line of argument. All of them brought up the idea of their work as isolated and ineffably individualized and critiqued this argument as misleading and strategic. They emphasized their labor and collective bargaining as an instrument for social justice, a lever with which to push an agenda for organizational change within the university. To that end, each of the union organizations from which participants were drawn were engaged in actions that crossed the traditional boundaries of a collective bargaining agreement. At WashU, WUGWU led the charge for a \$15 an hour whole campus minimum wage, a campaign that they ultimately won. They spent more than 6 months building community support for the initiative, protesting, and ultimately occupying campus, an action for which several were arrested. Importantly, this campaign did not include compensation minimums for graduate students but, rather, for staff and undergraduate student employees. Graduate students described this campaign as inspiring, exhilarating, and central to their development as students and activists despite the fact that their material working conditions were unaffected by the victory. When I asked Noah about how these actions affected administration-union relationships, he chuckled and dismissed the idea, elaborating:

They don't acknowledge any kind of social justice action at all. Either they can't believe we actually care about something other than stipend amounts or they just refuse to admit it. Either way, they pretend that our agenda is not social justice oriented even though that's what most of our actions and demands revolve around.

This moment encapsulates the conflict between the two ideological framings in this conflict. University administration are either or unwilling to engage the logic of

communal ties and social embeddedness, while union activists continue to frame their labor solidarity as a social movement. As Giroux (2014) put it, in the neoliberal university “all forms of solidarity, social agency, and collective resistance disappear into the murky waters of a politics in which the demands of privatized pleasures and ready-made individual choices are organized on the basis of market mentalities and moralities that cancel out all modes of social responsibility, commitment, and action” (P. 47). In their public-facing rhetoric, at least, university administrations interpret collective action in the neoliberal logic of individual gain.

Neoliberal Framing of International Students

The same logic of neoliberal individualism is applied to international students. In the administrative documents examined here, international graduate students are framed as even more incompatible with collective frameworks than their domestic colleagues. The specific conditions of their visa status and trans-cultural experience, according to the documents examined here, place barriers between them and other graduate students that make unionization detrimental and possibly dangerous for them. This argument relies on the foundational logic that there is no supportive collective framework, that the union is incapable of providing support and advocacy for international students. Conversely, union activist participants emphasized the commonalities between international and domestic students. In their framing, the university administration is ill-suited to supporting and advocating for international students. As part of the ‘checks and balances’ their labor is leveraged to protect international graduate students. The international students in this study often expressed anger and disbelief at what they perceived as patronizing and misleading rhetoric from

university administration. To the participants in this study, these statements were further motivation to unify and limit the power and control of central administration.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Implications

In this dissertation, I have explored the intersections of internationalization, changing academic labor, and social movements within and through US higher education. By looking at a particular facet of higher education - the unionization of graduate student workers and the labor relations that surround that movement - I have tapped into the ways in which such moments of conflict are navigated not only through specific disagreements over definitions, status, pay, and material working conditions but, rather, they engage and legitimate an interconnected network of ideas and definitions which I summarize under the term ideological framing.

When contrasting framing systems come into conflict, the tensions between them reveal the ideological stakes of organizational behavior. The ways in which university administrative statements have defined academic work, graduate study, and international students do more than strategically delimit the role of each of these categories. Instead, these administrative framings are interpreting the entire academy, engaging in a schema of linked understandings that connect labor relations to a broader theory of the role of the academy in society, a neoliberal frame rooted in ineffable individualism and a denial of social interconnectedness.

Ideological frames serve to explain and organize institutional behavior in strategic ways to achieve specific goals but can also have unintended implications or consequences through linked logics that convey embedded values that recast a comprehensive list of roles and relations within and between organizations (McAdam & Scott, 2005). This study examined the ways in which administrative statements, and by extension

administrative decisions, engage in framing that recasts the entire university under a neoliberal logic of individualism, affecting not only labor relations with graduate students but also the organizational environment as a whole. In doing so, this study provides a snapshot into the ideological stakes of administrative responses to labor actions. The emphasis on individuality, the need to downplay the social role of the university engages in a neoliberal ideology that may not serve long-term goals of the university.

Implications for University Leadership

University administrators, particularly executive leadership such as provosts, deans of graduate schools, and university presidents, can learn from this research by gaining understanding of the expanded interests and commitments of labor activists, who see their activism as concerned extensively with social justice over specific material issues such as stipend amounts. As this study revealed, administrative responses to unionization and graduate student labor actions have been remarkably homogeneous, invoking the same rhetoric if not the exact same words. Generally, the strategy to resist unionization, shown in this study and others, involves a no-holds-barred opposition, one that emphasizes the highly individualized nature of graduate education and downplays the value of graduate student work (Cain, 2017). This dissertation has demonstrated that another, possibly newer, part of that rhetoric involves specific targeting of international students. These types of responses, with such a high degree of similarity across 12 U.S. universities, may have been inherited, so to speak, from corporate or manufacturing models of labor relations or possibly even carried directly through union-avoidance firms hired by multiple universities, an increasingly common strategy in US universities (Serravallo, 2012). However, such models may have unintended consequences in

academic labor conflicts and, particularly, in labor relations with graduate students - consequences that administrators should bear in mind when crafting responses to unionization. All of the graduate student participants in this study experienced a process of radicalization in response to interactions with people who hold authority within the university, mostly university administrative leadership but, less often, with department heads, deans, and faculty. Participants described the behavior of university administrators in these exchanges as patronizing, inequitable, or motivated by greed. This evolution over the course of many interactions with university administration was particularly profound for international student participants. Higher education leaders and decision-makers might learn from this study more effective ways to interact with graduate student activists and handle unionization events. Graduate students are fundamentally different kinds of workers than those in industries from which such hardline anti-union strategies are drawn. Graduate student workers are what McAlevey (2016) calls “mission-driven workers,” for whom intangible qualities of the work are as important, if not more so, than the salary. This study demonstrates that graduate student activists are heavily invested in redistributing power within the university, leveraging their labor as a way to push the needle of organizational behavior toward a social-justice oriented model. University administrators need new models of labor relations with graduate students and might draw upon this research to develop such models that attend to the intangible, social-justice oriented demands of graduate student activists. At the same time, this research will help such decision-makers conduct a better cost-benefit analysis of unionization. One of the universities from which participants in this study were drawn spent over one million dollars to a union-avoidance law firm during the two years of the graduate student

unionization campaign. The findings of this research indicate that administrators, if they had been equipped with a better understanding of the motivations of union activists, might have avoided these kinds of expenses by compromising on matters of social engagement, graduate student participation in governance, and racial justice.

Beyond the financial bottom-line, university administrators called upon to respond to graduate student unionization movements might benefit from this research as a reminder of the ideological stakes at play in their responses. Higher education is different from other industries and social institutions in that its legitimacy is founded on value-laden abstractions such as excellence, moral authority, and ability to foster citizenship (Gumport, 2000). When university rhetoric invokes the neoliberal logics of isolated individualism and distance from society and community, it undermines the legitimacy of the academic institution. This troublesome effect comes at a time when higher education is already experiencing negative public opinion that questions its moral authority and public usefulness (Gavazzi & Gee, 2021). Universities are not well served by actions and statements that sever them from the kinds of social issues that the union activists are highlighting. Indeed, the mission statements of both institutions studied closely in this dissertation emphasize the centrality of their social role. Washington University's mission statement pledges to "act in service of truth through the formation of leaders, the discovery of knowledge for the betterment of our region, our nation and our world" (Washington University, 2022). The mission includes a commitment to "enhance the lives and livelihoods not only of our students, patients, and employees but also of the people of the greater St. Louis community and beyond." University administrators could

use this research to understand the ways that union activists are making demands that could move the organization *toward* its stated mission in these respects.

Implications for Graduate Student Activists

Ideological frames are more likely to be openly articulated and thrown into high relief when groups challenge dominant logics (McAdam & Scott, 2005). Thus, the moment of conflict between union and administration is a key moment to examine already-active tensions between different schemas for the university. Union activists directly engage administrative rhetoric, tease out the neoliberal logics embedded within it and counter with social movement logics that emphasize social connections and community impact. Furthermore, graduate student unions might learn about the role of social activism within their unions or unionizing campaigns. Material issues such as pay and benefits will always be significant to labor campaigns but labor organizers have an opportunity to link these issues to broader social issues and engage in ‘social movement unionism.’ Labor unions, broadly, have been theorized in terms of the tensions between union as an agent of social change and the “business service union” that represents the interests of its members without addressing the social context (Tarlau, 2011). The idea of the social movement union is that it “not only provides services to its members but also actively puts resources into organizing new members, supporting important political campaigns, and mobilizing workers to political actions” (Tarlau, 2011, p. 367-368). The activists interviewed in this study were brought to the unionization campaign primarily through its efforts to contribute to organizational and social change. Academic labor organizers could use this insight to create a socially engaged roadmap for unionization and labor actions.

Conclusion

Graduate student unionization movements and administrative responses to them are taking place against the backdrop of a changing university and shifting graduate student population. This study highlights the impact of internationalization on graduate student labor and campaigns for unionization. Comparing the results of this study with unionization movements from the first wave of unionization that occurred in the 1990s, we see that international students are increasingly central to the tensions between union activists and university administration. For labor activists this study generates evidence of the pressing need to address the needs of international students in labor campaigns. This study establishes that across institutional type (public or private), geographical region, and study body composition, U.S. university administrations are framing international students as a possible faultline to splinter labor movements, regardless of the unionization status of graduate students at that particular institution. Graduate student labor organizers and activists should anticipate this type of union-avoidance tactic and make international student demands central to their actions.

Giroux (2015) calls for activism within and around higher education to combat the increasingly neoliberal logics that are defining postsecondary education across the globe by outlining the social implications of the neoliberal university:

Clearly, there is more at stake here than the abrogation of workers' bargaining rights and skyrocketing university tuition rates. There are also questions regarding what kind of society we want to become (p. 194).

He calls for academics and intellectuals to "provide a discourse of possibility that challenges this terrible reconfiguration of higher education" (p. 194). This dissertation

has identified the ways in which graduate student unions are producing and engaging in this kind of discourse. Perhaps most importantly, this study describes the ideological stakes of labor disputes in higher education and calls for a collective re-framing of such conflicts in order to create new possibilities for sustainable and equitable higher education.

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APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol – International and Domestic Graduate Students

Opening Question: Can you tell me about how you came to graduate school and what kind of work you do as a graduate student?

<p><i>R1.a: How graduate student union activists understand administrative framings?</i></p>	<p><i>R1.b How do graduate student union activists understand union framings of the university? How do they individually understand the university?</i></p>	<p><i>R2.b: What is the role of international graduate students in unionization movements as described in administrative documents and how does that compare to their representation in pro-union documents?</i></p>
<p>What were your perceptions of the university before graduate study? Have your experiences matched your expectations?</p> <p>What role does your work play in the career of your supervisor? In the university?</p> <p>What messages have you received from the university administration about your work?</p> <p>Would you describe your role in the university as an apprentice? Worker? Why?</p> <p>How does the university represent itself in public for a?</p> <p>How do the people in your community think of the university?</p> <p>Has your participation in the union changed your perception of the university? How?</p>	<p>What is your role in the union? What made you join the union?</p> <p>How kinds of actions have you participated in? Who was invited to participate in the union-related action?</p> <p>What kinds of messages did you receive about your work during this event? How did they influence how you think about your work or the work of other graduate students?</p> <p>How does the union relate to the university? What kinds of messages did you receive from union leaders about the administration?</p> <p>How did your participation affect the way you think about your graduate student colleagues?</p> <p>How did it affect the way you think about unions?</p>	<p><i>Option 1 [for international students]:</i> How did your status as an international student affect your graduate experience?</p> <p><i>Option 2 [for domestic]:</i> What was the role of international students in the union?</p> <p>What kinds of messages have you received about international students?</p> <p>How did you respond to these messages? How did the union respond?</p> <p>How effective were these messages? Did they influence graduate students' decisions? How did they affect relationships between international and domestic graduate student workers?</p>

APPENDIX B – INITIAL DOCUMENT RUBRIC

Initial Coding Rubric – Documents

Source:	Date:	Title:
Formal/Informal:	Intended Audience:	Stance on Union:
<i>R1: ideological framing of graduate students and their work</i>	<i>R2.a student relationships with unionization efforts</i>	<i>R2.b: international graduate students in unionization movements</i>
Representation of graduate student activities: WORK / APPRENTICESHIP / OTHER	Representation of union event: OPPORTUNITIES / RISKS	Representation of international students: PARTICIPANTS / VULNERABLE / OTHER
<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>	<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>	<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>
Description of working conditions: AUTONOMOUS / SUBORDINATE	Union action as social movement: IDEOLOGY / STRATEGIC	Relevant factors for international students: LEGAL / CULTURAL / FINANCIAL
<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>	<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>	<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>
Representation of university organization: EDUCATIONAL / CORPORATE	Representation of other stakeholders: FACULTY / COMMUNITY	Voice of international students in this document? YES / NO / HOW
<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>	<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>	<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>

APPENDIX C – REVISED DOCUMENT RUBRIC

Revised Coding Rubric – Documents

Source:	Date:	Title:
Formal/Informal:	Intended Audience:	Stance on Union:
<i>R1: ideological framing of graduate students and their union</i>	<i>R2.ideological framing of the university</i>	<i>R2.b: international graduate students in unionization movements</i>
Representation of union event key issues: MATERIAL / SOCIAL / ORGANIZATIONAL	Characteristics of university: PRESTIGE / FAMILY / EMPLOYER	Representation of international students: SCHOLARS / VULNERABLE / WORKERS
<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>	<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>	<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>
Focal Unit: INDIVIDUAL / COMMUNITY/ CAMPUS	Social role of university: IVORY TOWER / COMMUNITY / LEADER	Relevant factors for international students: LEGAL / CULTURAL / FINANCIAL
<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>	<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>	<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>
Representation of university-student relationships: PATERNALISTIC / HYPERINDIVIDUALIZED / COOPERATIVE	Representation of other stakeholders: FACULTY / COMMUNITY	Voice of international students in this document? YES / NO / HOW
<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>	<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>	<i>Notes/Key Element:</i>

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