

and theatrical behavior do their thinking, their work: the unsettled space of performance.

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Graduate Student Voices

To the Editor:

I would like to respond to some of the issues raised in the five letters on graduate studies and *PMLA* (Forum, 113 [1998]: 1150–53). I am a graduate teaching fellow myself, and I can think of quite a few reasons for the low response to the call for letters on this topic, noted by Martha Banta (Editor's Column, 113 [1998]: 1077–78). Some of the reasons mask deeper issues of academic security, visibility, and future marketability—issues that, for good or ill, have forced many graduate students to adopt a policy of prudent silence in controversies. It has thus been my experience that individual graduate students are in no position nowadays to engage critically in any comfortable manner with those above them in the academic establishment, especially when the students' critical suggestions deal with policy matters outside the narrow milieu of graduate studies, an area narrowly defined in some administrators' thoughts.

My first observation is that graduate students suffer generally from a lack of academic security, which is different from the lack of academic freedom that many graduate teaching fellows have voiced, in that insecurity often inclines graduate students who would otherwise speak out about unfairness or restrictions on their academic freedom—for example, lack of upper-level undergraduate teaching opportunities for ABD PhD candidates—to remain silent for fear of reprisal, censure, demotion, or, in the worst case, firing. It is a common complaint that graduate students are “replaceable” faculty members; even graduate students who are not teaching have voiced this kind of concern to me. Oftentimes, one of the criteria for showing “good progress” in a graduate program of study is that the student does not make waves; those who do are often marginalized. The great majority of full-time faculty members are decent people who are more than willing to encourage the development of the minds and careers of their students. Yet some faculty members see suggestions from graduate students as threatening, and many graduate students, once bitten, remain shy about suggesting change, on however small a scale.

This leads me to my second point: that graduate students are often implicitly taught that being seen and heard is a liability. Many graduate students believe that their voices, while perhaps officially solicited through the inclusion of token “graduate representatives” on departmental and institutional committees, are not especially valued in the decision making at their institutions. I invite readers to think of the committees on which they may have served where there were graduate student representatives: did these representatives have voting rights, or were they present as “observers” only, meant to report back to other graduate students on faculty actions? At all three of the postsecondary institutions I have attended, no graduate representatives on faculty committees had voting status. Further, I ask my readers to recall, if they can, instances where their graduate student committee members brought up business or portions of an agenda at meetings. Such actions, I suspect, are often tabled, deferred, and ignored in favor of the “real” business at hand, and the graduate students who are bold enough to attempt to take an active role in their own governance seem to be labeled activists who do not know their proper places. In the working of many departments, although graduate students' presence through representation is often required by the institution, their voices are not. I am tempted to draw an analogy to the hiring of token minority faculty members, but that issue is much broader (and, I believe, more pressing) than the scope of my present remarks.

Moreover, the situation of minority faculty members at many institutions is directly opposite to that of graduate students in one regard: numbers. There are plenty of graduate students at most universities, more than there are faculty members in many departments. So why is it that this large potential influence group is often not heard in the boardroom about the classroom? One of the reasons that graduate students don't typically write letters like this one has to do with their future marketability. While Cary Nelson asserts that graduate student union organizers are seen by many hiring committees as leaders who would be valuable to the institutional administrative and legislative bodies (lecture, Duquesne Univ., 26 Nov. 1997), some see such leaders as subversive rabble-rousers, mainly because the kinds of changes the organizers advocate pit them against the administrative and legislative bodies that they might admirably serve in the future. I must admit that I considered sending this letter not as a set of personal observations, made and signed by one graduate student, but as a statement of the English Graduate Organization at Duquesne University. The adage about strength in numbers still obtains, and although I feel strongly about the need for change in

many aspects of the relations institutions have with graduate students and with graduate student teachers, I can empathize with those who may have read the letters on graduate studies in the October *PMLA* and, while convinced that something needed to be done, concluded that it was impossible for them to do anything so public as write a letter to be read by an international audience.

There are, however, steps that individual students can take, at all levels of involvement, to help alleviate some of these problems. Departmental graduate organizations can join the MLA Graduate Student Caucus. I favor the creation of locally unionized graduate student bodies as well; for instance, unionization of the graduate students at the major institutions in the Pittsburgh area would pro-

mote the standardization of pay and benefits for graduate student teachers and facilitate comparisons of the quality of the programs offered at each institution. The inability of many of us to enter the critical discussion safely can be remedied by the aggregation of individual graduate student voices.

Although the hypotheses I have put forward here are general, they are based on my experiences with students in several graduate programs across the United States and Canada. I am interested to hear in this forum from graduate students to whom these generalizations apply—and from those to whom they do not.

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