

University-Corporate Partnership and the Student's Right to Learn

By Marc Bousquet © 2007

In its ruthless quest for super-cheap labor, the university has fastened on new ways of exploiting the labor of an old favorite: the student worker. We are all familiar with the figure of student working a minimum-wage job as "financial aid."

On many campuses, the largest segment of campus workers are students, outnumbering faculty, staff and other workers combined.

Undergraduates work for their degree-granting institution as painters, maids, janitors, cooks, groundskeepers, truck loaders, physical therapists, daycare staff, teaching assistants, computer technicians, coaches, security guards and administrative assistants, typically for wages at or near the national or local minimums.

For a significant fraction of these students, their on-campus jobs are just one element of their efforts to fund their degrees, which increasingly involves unsustainable debt loads and additional off-campus employment. Many students receiving work-study "assistance" are also working an additional job.

There are nearly 20 million students enrolled in postsecondary institutions. Eighty percent work to finance their college education. Almost half of that number—between 7 and 8 million undergraduates--work full-time, or multiple part time jobs approaching a full-time equivalent. With the evacuation of the humanities, the near-removal of tenured faculty from general education, there is little that amounts to a common experience in higher education, not even the earning of a degree—except the near-universal experience of ultra-low-wage work.

One Sad Example: Corporate "Partnerships"

I first starting thinking about this at the University of Louisville, where I first received tenure. I arrived in 1998, shortly after the university began a much-ballyhooed "partnership" with UPS and other local institutions of higher ed. Currently there are 6,000 undergraduate students working for UPS at their Louisville hub, with plans to hire thousands more. About 3,000 of those students work a midnight shift that ends at UPS's convenience—typically 3 or 4 am, though longer during the holiday and other peak shipping seasons.

Nearly all of the third-shift workers are undergraduate students who have signed employment contracts with something called the "Metropolitan College." The name is misleading, since it's not a college at all. An "enterprise" partnership between UPS, the city of Louisville, and other local campuses, Metropolitan College is in fact little more than a labor contractor. Supported by public funds, this "college" offers no degrees and does no educating.

Its sole function is to entice students to sign contracts that commit them to provide cheap labor in exchange for education benefits at the partner institutions. The "Metro College" arrangement alone has provided UPS with over 10,000 ultra-low-cost student workers since 1997, the same year that the Teamsters launched a crippling strike against the carrier. The Louisville arrangement is the vanguard of UPS's efforts to convert its part-time payroll, as far as possible, to a "financial aid" package for student workers in partnership with campuses near its sorting and loading facilities.

As a result of carefully-planned corporate strategy, between 1997 and 2003 UPS hired undergraduate students to staff more than half of its 130,000 part-time positions. Students are currently the majority of all part-timers, and the overwhelming majority on the least-desirable shifts. Part of UPS's strategy is that only some student employees receive education benefits. By reserving the education benefits of its "Earn and Learn" programs to workers willing to work undesirable hours, UPS has over the past decade recruited approximately 50,000 part-time workers to its least desirable shifts without raising the pay (in fact, while pushing them to work harder for continually lower pay against inflation). The largest benefit promises are reserved for students who think they can handle working after midnight every night of the school week.

The consequences of night-shift work are well documented, and the preponderance of available evidence suggests markedly negative effects for the Louisville students. Every instructor to whom I spoke reported excessive fatigue and absenteeism (due to fatigue, but also an extraordinarily high physical injury rate: "They all got hurt," one reports.) Students who signed employment contracts with Metro College showed substantial failure to persist academically. "I would lose students midterm, or they would never complete final assignments," observed the same source, "They would just stop coming at some point."

In a desperate attempt to stem the tide of academic nonpersistence by these students, faculty groups scheduled special UPS-only sections between 5 and 11pm both on campus and at the hub. They even began a ritual of 3 am advising, sending as many as a dozen faculty out to the airport hours before dawn in order to catch the exhausted students coming directly off the sort. Since nearly all of the faculty involved taught and served on committees five days a week, their efforts to keep students from dropping out by teaching evenings and advising before dawn resulted in a bizarre 24-hour cycle of work for themselves.

Rather than relieving economic pressure, Metropolitan College appears to have increased the economic distress of the majority of participants. According to the

company's own fact sheet, these student workers giving up five nights' sleep will typically be paid for just fifteen to twenty hours a week. Since the wage ranges from just \$8.50 at the start to no more than \$9.50 for the majority of the most experienced, this can mean net pay *below* \$100 in a week, and averaging out to a little over \$120. The rate of pay bears emphasizing: because the students must report five nights a week and are commonly let go after just three hours each night, *their take-home pay for sleep deprivation and physically hazardous toil will generally be less than \$25 per shift.*

In fact, most UPS part-timers earn little more than six thousand dollars in a year. Most have at least one another job: their typical earnings from UPS in 2006-2007 would generally have covered little more than the worker's car payment, insurance, gasoline and other transportation-related expenses. "Everyone had another job," one instructor recalled. "Even the high school students had another job. The high school students were working two jobs. For some people that meant working Saturday nights as a waitress, but for others it was much more extensive. For a lot of people it meant that they got up every day and went to work in the afternoon before going in to classes and UPS in the evening." Every instructor to whom I spoke confirmed the pressure that the ultra-low wage added to the unreasonable working hours and physical hazards as a detriment to students' chances for academic persistence. "That was when they skipped class," affirmed another instructor, "when they were going to another job. I was just amazed how many of them were going to another job."

UPS presents a triple threat to students' prospects for academic persistence: sleep deprivation and family-unfriendly scheduling, ultra-low compensation resulting in secondary and tertiary part-time employment, and a high injury rate. UPS refuses to provide meaningful persistence figures for the more than 50,000 students it has "aided" over the past decade. But of the 10,000 students it has "aided" at the Louisville hub, it could account for little more than 300 degrees earned, including both bachelor's and associates' degrees. The most generous interpretation of the few statistics they've made available suggests persistence to degree of about 12%.

This talk is adapted from the author's How The University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation, available from NYU Press as of December 28, 2007.