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## **Suicide Squeeze: Calling the Shots at SUNY Binghamton**

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The squeeze is on graduate students at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Binghamton. Classrooms are increasingly crowded, funding is increasingly tied to speed toward degree completion, and "self-funded" is a word uttered by many administrators without any wincing. In many ways, these pressures represent a microcosm of dynamics happening across the SUNY system and across the nation (if not globe). This essay will attempt to represent the broader phenomena with a directed eye toward "what's happening on the ground" at one campus/university system in the Northeastern United States over the last five months of 1998.

### **Binghamton's Administration Sends Holiday 1998 Wishes**

In 1998, the State University of New York "Trustees" passed a new funding design called the Resource Allocation Method (RAM). This design sends money to campuses, primarily, based on the number of "Full Time Equivalents" or FTEs that the campus can earn. Typically, this happens through raw enrollment figures. The other major component of RAM is its allowance for campuses to retain increasing amounts of the income they generate. The result of both of these policies is a system that encourages competition within the SUNY system, in which fraud (very similar to Medicare stealing) is being perpetrated on some campuses (e.g., SUNY Binghamton) at the same time that fees are being doubled or more at the most aggressive campuses (e.g., SUNY Buffalo).

At Binghamton, on November 7, 1998, the administration sent a letter to over 272 graduate students notifying them that their credit enrollment had been changed (for them) from one credit to nine credits. That is, with no notification, the administration went into the Registrar's computers and simply made the change for the semester-in-progress and wrote a letter to those affected to say, among other things, that "[this change] will provide incentives for achieving [doctoral] candidacy more quickly." Of course, the change will do this by increasing the fees for pre-candidacy students. The increase is being tempered by a provision that reduces fees for advanced students/employees, but that provision is only effective through the 1999-2000 academic year. Once the fall of 2000 is reached, the fees for nine credits per semester of coursework will be at least \$600 per year, eroding a great deal of the gains made by the GSEU in the last round of contract negotiations. [1](#)

The administration's rationales for the change vary depending on context. In the initial letter to those affected, they tell the students (many of whom are also employed as teaching assistants) that "this change will enable doctoral students' transcripts to reflect the significant investment of time they make in dissertations, help them on the job market, provide incentives for achieving candidacy more quickly, and provide a small but welcome increase in accessible funds when a student completes comprehensives." Ignoring the accuracy and utility of the first two reasons, and the pressures of the third reason, we then come to the fourth and most important motive. The move by the administration gained the equivalent of

68 FTEs for the campus, a credit worth close to \$500,000 for the next academic year.

To top things off, the next and final sentence of the administration's letter states "For now, these changes will be made for all students currently certified full time and require no action on your part." Suffice it to say that the desired inactivity of the university's marks did not materialize. Instead, resistance came in many forms and is presently being pursued through the contractual grievance procedure gained by the Graduate Student Employees Union (GSEU), Communications Workers of America Local 1188. The administration's failure to talk with any union representatives about the change before it was enacted is one of the grounds of the GSEU's grievance.

At the same time that credit hours were changed, the SUNY Binghamton Financial Aid office sent a "re-packaged" aid offer dated November 24, 1998 to approximately 100 graduate students, many of whom are also current members of the GSEU (i.e., some others are on various kinds of campus fellowships or Research Assistants -- people presently not represented by a union). These people were told that the promissory notes they had signed were being unilaterally changed so as to deduct up to \$5,100 in loans that some had been committed. The result of this policy proposal (which again came without any prior talks with the GSEU) was the need for many advanced students (especially those with dependents) to immediately start thinking about terminating their career as a graduate student/teaching assistant.

Because this second policy proposal had such an immediate and vital impact on the lives of so many people, a demonstration was held outside the Financial Aid office that was created by 50-60 affected and concerned people. <sup>2</sup> The demonstration was organized by a variety of groups, at the front of which was the GSEU, whose earlier newsletter carried the headline "GSEU Rejects [Holiday-Time Attacks]." The immediate effect of the demonstration, and the embarrassment it created, was a statement from the campus President stating that case-by-case arrangements would be made to prevent the loan deductions for the current year. This concession, however, does nothing to help GSEU members for future years. Indeed, it is on this front (among others) that the GSEU is fighting several fights (to become news in the coming months).

### **Food for the Mill ??**

These fights, unfortunately, are not something that have come out of the blue. In fact, it should be clear that the increasing pressures to advance to candidacy are intimately tied to the ability for the administration to request inaction from those affected. As so many graduate students come to know, there are only 24 hours in the day. And if you failed to read 100 pages that day or write some more of your grant proposal or dissertation, then it was a wasted day.

At the same time as these pressures are being created to channel people through the mills of the university, there is a simultaneous pressure being created on campuses to fill classrooms with more and more undergraduates and fewer and fewer professors. These two movements, of course, directly and indirectly impact graduate students, and of course, other members of the campus community. First, TAs and GAs are pressured with more work (at the same time as they're being pressured to finish "their own work") as class and section sizes are increased without any negotiation with the graduate student bodies or the GSEU. At Binghamton, this is motivated in large part by an internal funding system that mirrors RAM. In short, departments are allocated monies based on the number of FTEs they can claim. Among other things, this system causes departments to fight to increase the number of degrees they award (both graduate and undergraduate) and the number of students they teach. One can imagine further that such pressures can create a force to degree completion that rubs against the time required for thorough scholarship as well as a force that inhibits graduate students taking their credit-hours to other departments (to do interdisciplinary work). For undergraduates and faculty, there is increased pressure under this system to

entice (in whatever creative ways) more students into their departmental classes. This has been done by increasing class sizes and frowning upon professors who tend not to indulge in high grades very often.

A second direct effect of the administration-led movements is that TAs and GAs are increasingly used as instructors of courses in their own right. For example, while such standards very recently used to be unspeakable, it is now acceptable at SUNY Binghamton that second-year graduate students without an MA be the full instructor of record for undergraduate courses.

Indirectly, of course, this affects future PhDs because these are the policies that are leaving so many PhDs unemployed! College deans throughout SUNY may try to excuse themselves for such policies because of the massive cutbacks sustained under Cuomo-Pataki, but the fact is that the cutbacks in full-time employees must be recognized for the blow that they are and also must be fought with broader vigilance from the faculty. [3](#)

As for the role of graduate student employees, besides often fighting to see who can carry the most burden, there is also a real seduction found in the "opportunity" to "get practice and gain experience" being the instructor of record. Some graduate students, however, have gotten practice teaching between eight and ten courses before receiving their PhDs. Their situations are certainly complicated, but the pressures and effects are the same nonetheless. This is the race to the bottom, and footrunners are often not hard to find.

It is essential, at this point, to take into account the different pressures extant in different disciplines. For example, while it seems the norm that graduate student instructors in English departments are responsible for their own courses, the dynamics I have described are happening in other parts of the college as well. For example, in the departments of Sociology and Anthropology at Binghamton, I know many graduate students to be working as almost-traditional (and often popular) instructors of record.

Along with these extra responsibilities, however, neither the training nor the support is often shared. For example, there are basic problems people experience such as not being informed (like faculty members) about the timing of your exam or being supplied with certain needed paperwork or copies in addition to the larger problems such as being appointed to teach a Composition course without adequate training or qualifications in evaluating other people's writing in the expected technical fashion. Indeed, at Binghamton, there are now Composition classes held all across the campus -- and with no training for the TA/GAs. Given the fact that many of the TA/GAs hired in these courses are not equipped to offer detailed grammar-level suggestions or to trained in current composition pedagogies would lead me and others to use the word "fraudulent" when we think about the value of these courses.

Most recently, the subject of undergraduate teaching on campus has become a topic of discussion as the President created and named members to a Task Force on Undergraduate Learning for the New Millennium. Inspired by the Boyer Commission report released from Stony Brook in the Summer of 1998 (which makes many references to graduate student instructors), the original 15-member Task Force had NO graduate students on it. A letter from the GSEU changed the situation to gain one representative, but the representative was not chosen by the GSEU. A more recent letter from the GSEU calling on the need for greater and more direct representation has been met with the response (from the Chair) that "the committee is already too large" and that the President has selected members for the Task Force with specific charges in mind. Throughout the Spring 1999 semester, it will be a job of active GSEU members to keep pressure on this "Task Force" and the "recommendations" it makes to the campus President. For background, the only other known "Task Force" to be formed on campus is responsible for attempting to change the name of the institution to "Binghamton University," leaving the state affiliation for the fine print.

In a similar action of omission, the State University of New York has recently been forced to review their mission statements and revise new ones at the request of the SUNY Provost and former Manhattan Institute officer Peter Salins. Once again, the "Binghamton University" administration did not actively solicit discussion on campus about the mission review. In fact, a letter from the GSEU written while it was still being drafted did not receive a reply until the mission review had been completed. Further, the only graduate student on this committee was unknown to both most of the leadership of the GSEU and the Graduate Student Organization (GSO).

### **Fighting Back--And Taking Some Victories**

These kinds of increasingly infantilistic pressure need to be rejected and at Binghamton, at least, there are some reasons to hope and remember that victory is possible.

On November 17, the SUNY Trustees arrived on the Binghamton campus with zero notification from the administration. In fact, one of the students who knew of the Trustees' visit before-the-fact approached a campus police officer the evening before the official meeting and asked if the gaudy evening gathering in a campus eating room was being held for the Trustees. The officer eventually admitted that it was the Trustees but that they would be leaving the next morning. This kind of deception was unfortunately not unique.

The Trustees began their meeting the next day more than one-half hour earlier than the few local media folks had originally been told. This (along with the failure to make any notice on campus prior to the meeting) appears to be a violation of the New York State Open Meeting Law and is being pursued by John Mather, President of the Preservation of SUNY Association. Mather, a retired upper administrator from SUNY Central, is now one of the most active and informed watchdogs of the "Trustees." Because of his actions (and because of a week-long campus beautification effort), the word of the Trustees meeting did leak into a variety of resistance-circles prior to the Trustees' arrival. As a result, an impressive welcoming committee was organized to make the Trustees feel as unwanted as possible.

In the morning of their arrival for a set of business meetings, the main entrance of the school was staffed by four people holding two large banners -- "Stop RAMming SUNY" and "Welcome SUNY Tru\$tee\$." Meanwhile, on campus, hundreds of posters were being put around campus detailing problems with the Trustees and the need to show voices at the official meeting. Simultaneously, another set of students held a 20-foot-long sign in the center of campus that said "SUNY-Killers Here."

At the meeting itself, more than 20 active protestors made it into the meeting (including one person dressed as a fat cat). More than 20 others were told they needed to watch the meeting on "closed circuit" television in a separate room because there was not enough space in the meeting room. In fact, I only made it into the meeting room after I told them that I was a reporter for a campus newspaper called [fair Use](#).

In the room, administrators were decked out in their Sunday bonnets while the protestors held a silent, standing vigil across the back and part of the side of the room. The only television station at the meeting focused their entire coverage on the protest and the most egregious conflict of interest on the SUNY Board. That is, Vice Chair Erland Kailbourne was made a subject of the news because of his role as CEO of Fleet Bank, the nation's ninth largest lender of student loans. When another Trustee was asked about Kailbourne's multiple roles, the response was something to the effect that Mr. Kailbourne is an upstanding citizen. "He's one of the most respected *bankers* in New York State" (emphasis added).

News coverage was prompted by the host of "protesting activities" in addition to a statement drafted by

the GSEU on the Trustees. In fact, the whole group of protestors at the meeting had planned to read the GSEU Statement if they were able to gain the chance. [4](#) As one might expect, however, when a student representative raised her hand to gain the audience, the Chair of the Board was very quick to adjourn the meeting and ignore the students. It was clear that no dialogue was going to be volunteered with people holding signs such as "SUNY students love Fleet Bank -- almost as much as Trustee Kailbourne," or "How much does it cost to speak in here?" or "Stop privatizing education, corporate bastards."

The local Gannett newspaper ran a front page story that was a rather bland account of the open business meeting, but the front page of the Community section included a picture of the protestors and two stories about various fights happening on the campus and across the system. One story focused on the public forum (organized primarily by John Mather) entitled "the State University of New York versus the SUNY Trustees." Since no gubernatorially-appointed Trustees were present, it was an occasion for representatives from the GSEU, the Student Association of the State University (SASU), and the United University Professions (UUP) to join Mather and the student Trustee Celine Traylor in protest. Quotes in the paper the next morning included GSEU President Monazir Khan asking rhetorically "Why are there so many managers of capital on the Board, and no managers of education?" This kind of argument was the main theme of the GSEU Statement on the Trustees (which is still circulating across the state and should help to kick up more storms).

The other Gannett story focused on the campus debate over the names "Binghamton University" and "SUNY Binghamton." Specifically, the article drew attention to a student government resolution that would call for the school's name to return to "SUNY Binghamton" instead of the more privatized-sounding "BU." This article, in fact, prompted two television news stories and likely helped in the eventual victory of the resolution's supporters to have the most-circulated student newspaper change their "style" to "SUNY Binghamton." In fact, the Gannett story forced the university spokesperson to be quoted as saying that "the official name of this school is the State University of New York Center at Binghamton." It is worth noting that since that time (and the intervening letters to the editor), the most circulated student newspaper on campus has now turned (for at least this semester) to calling itself "the State University of New York at Binghamton's student newspaper." [5](#) Previously, the paper not only talked exclusively about "BU" but also censored the use of "SUNY Binghamton" in submitted op-eds.

The utility of the protests against the Trustees included not simply the short-term creation of news, but also the welcome initiation of some relations with local agents of the off-campus mass media. For example, two days after the Trustees meeting, a local TV reporter returned to campus to investigate an issue she had read about in the GSEU Statement. Specifically, she took time to meet with the Provost to find out about the "Provost's Challenge" to professors to design courses with 100 or more undergraduates that require no teaching assistants. Those professors (presently numbering three) who find themselves so "innovative" are rewarded with a \$1,000 raise in their base salary. This is a raise that more than one GSEU member has called a "bribe."

These kinds of relationships have already proven beneficial in the more recent fights that the GSEU and other graduate students have been forced to wage several weeks later, and they will no doubt prove useful in the coming months and years as well. In fact, the success of the protestors in creating news has prompted talk among the now-confident advocates to engage in future actions similar in nature. This kind of change in thinking will not only allow more effective defenses against attacks but should also facilitate action to regain lost grounds (e.g., in only the last five years, SUNY has "lost" about 1,600 professors at the same time that the corporate tax rate is being slashed by the Republican legislature).

To leave an analysis of SUNY (and Binghamton) at this point, however, would leave us inside the bubbles of resistance that still have hope and fighting power. To not represent these bubbles, of course, would be wrong, but it is certainly fair to say the fights are found inside bubbles and are not better represented as a



dome encapsulating the whole of campus sentiments toward action.

From both this description of the Trustees protest and the Financial Aid protest, it should be clear that resistance is happening in Binghamton. But it certainly still has a long way to go. As intimated in my clause about the corporate tax cut, the relationship of SUNY, in general, and Binghamton, in particular, is tied clearly with relationships between the powers-that-be in the worlds of government and capital. It is our job to make those relationships as clear as possible to as many people as possible.

Of course, it is also our job to grade papers, handle exams, teach entire courses (at times), do research on our own, go to academic conferences (typically on our own expense), and do things like take care of our bodies and spirits -- so it is clear that tensions on our time exist. Those tensions will not go away, however, if people remain silent. Indeed, for each new person who joins the local union or other group working for change, there is less work to be shouldered by the rest of us. At Binghamton, the re-growth of the GSEU (following 19 months of receivership to the CWA) is encouraging in this respect. Success will depend on the number of active voices incorporated into these fights.

The just-begun contract negotiations between the GSEU and the state should serve as a proving ground for the local. For example, wages for TA/GAs at Binghamton are \$3,000 less than the university's own (conservative) estimate for the costs of living in Binghamton. To combat this inadequacy, the GSEU at Binghamton has initiated what should become a statewide petition campaign (and hopefully more) towards a Living Wage.

## **Conclusion**

Some graduate students are at the metaphorical home plate in their careers as graduate students/employees. Others are at third base and looking for home (e.g., secure employment). The coaches are unfortunately often too eager to call for suicide squeezes (because it used to work to be poor for a bit in return for future tenure) while the administration (i.e., the other team) is getting good at anticipating the plays and capitalizing on the predictability. Batters are told by umpires (e.g., Gov. Pataki) that they are privileged to have helmets and asked by their agents not to dwell too much on their lonely and stranded peers on third base. Batters are told to follow orders and get to first by any means possible. They're told to suck it up, and one day home will be yours.

This attitude of hard-work-will-pay-off (while admirable and worthy) would appear (unfortunately) to be discordant with the reality that is being created in universities.

I say this not out of a congenital pessimism but because I have seen too many highly-qualified Ph.D. graduates get stuck on third base.

If we individually fail to wise up to our situations, soon the batters won't even have helmets (let alone teams to play on). Instead, they'll be told to ask their parents for one. If their parents don't have a helmet, their shelter from "the market" will be torn apart regardless of skill, merit, or qualifications.

The privatization and stratification of higher education is in full-force. But, as Marc Bousquet has written, "any economist will tell you that the chief determinants of higher education working conditions are law (in the form of appropriations and statutes) and institutional policy. At public universities, working conditions are profoundly influenced by state law, as in New York State, where the legislature annually renews, the Governor eagerly signs, and the Mayor cravenly applauds, a bill encouraging the retirement of tenured professors." <sup>6</sup> Given the converse that change opposite to privatization and "corporatization" is created by people in other roles (e.g., students, teachers, other workers), I look forward to seeing more of us start

working toward the construction of our own plays.

### *Notes*

1. It is worth noting that the total cost of fees for graduate students at Buffalo has gone from \$351.80 per year to \$709.80 per year in the period 1995-96 to 1998-99. The GSEU is taking action against this administrative move as well. Likewise, at Binghamton, for undergraduates, it is worth noting that the administration recently raised the athletic fee by \$50 immediately following permission granted by the Trustees. While there was some discussion about the raise in fees (which is paying for the associated move to NCAA Division II, "scholarship" athletics), a student vote defeated the move and the Faculty Senate voted against the move by a two-to-one margin. Despite this, the machine moved forward (for now at least), and Binghamton is presently bragging about their first year in Division II sports with plans to meet the other SUNY university centers in Division I competition as soon as possible. Fees in addition to minor but highly publicized contributions from corporations like PepsiCo (who recently paid for a baseball field scoreboard) will be the fuel for this vanity contest.
2. Jennifer Lutzenberger and Emma K. Morrill, "Thursday's Protest in Review," memo, December 5, 1998.
3. For a full text of the GSEU Statement on the SUNY Trustees, please contact the author of this article.
4. It should be noted that the faculty members of SUNY are represented by the United University Professionals (UUP), AFT Local 2190.
5. See GSEU Steering Committee (1999) for a summary of this fight.
6. Marc Bousquet, "Foreword: The Institution as False Horizon." *Workplace* 1.1 (February 1998), 23-24.

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