

2012

Hard Times: Women Scholars and the Dynamics of Economic Recession

Linda Zionkowski
Ohio University, zionkows@ohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/abo>

 Part of the [Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Zionkowski, Linda (2012) "Hard Times: Women Scholars and the Dynamics of Economic Recession," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.
<https://www.doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.2.2.9>
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol2/iss2/9>

This Scholarship is brought to you for free and open access by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830* by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Hard Times: Women Scholars and the Dynamics of Economic Recession

Keywords

administrators, budget, debt, graduate programs, graduate students, higher education, labor, professional development, state of the profession

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/).

While straitened budgets and shrinking resources present difficulties for all of us within the university system, some of the most vulnerable people affected are graduate students. Occupying a liminal space as apprentices within the profession, students enrolled in master's and doctoral programs often find themselves facing a situation in which opportunities for professional development have become occasions for exploitation. No department, of course, would claim the abuse of graduate students as part of its mission statement; rather, we want students enrolled in our programs to flourish as scholars and teachers and bring credit upon our institutions after they graduate and find employment. But in a climate of financial austerity, our good intentions might actually work to the detriment of our students by promoting a set of established practices—or a culture—that works against their best interests. As women increasingly accept administrative positions, becoming deans, chairs, and directors of graduate studies, we find that the situation of graduate students emerges as an important (and recurrent) concern in our working lives. The remarks and suggestions that I'm offering here are meant to call attention to the complicated dynamic of decreasing resources and increasing expectations and propose ways in which we can help our students create a manageable balance between the two.

One of the foundational assumptions of graduate programs is that they develop students' pedagogical skills, enabling fledgling academics to become confident and proficient teachers in their disciplines. A review of graduate students' syllabi, grading practices, and teaching evaluations more often than not shows their dedication to their classes and suggests that they prepare seriously for the career they are seeking. But three developments within our profession—the declining number of lines for tenure-track faculty, stipend stagnation, and outstanding record of accomplishments expected of job-seekers—contribute to the overuse of graduate student labor and to the debt load that causes our students to be complicit in their overuse.

Competition to retain tenure-track faculty lines has grown more intense as university budgets have shrunk, resulting in difficulties with staffing courses; the problem is particularly acute in disciplines where effective instruction requires smaller class sizes. Since a substantial number of writing-intensive general education courses (Freshman and Junior Composition, Introduction to Literature, etc.) are often housed in English departments, the opportunity for overload classes easily presents itself to graduate students, some of whom will give time and energy to teaching that could have been spent on progress toward their degree. Graduate students, of course, are entirely justified in accepting overload assignments, even to their own detriment: tuition waivers often do not cover university fees (which at my institution can run in excess of \$3,000 annually), and graduate stipends frequently fall below or remain slightly above the Federal Poverty Guidelines for individuals (estimated at \$11,170 in 2012). Moreover, graduate students are compelled to bear the cost of their own professional development: hiring committees look for evidence of sustained academic activity, including presentations at conferences, attendance at workshops, and publications based upon archival research, all of which cost far more than can be managed by graduate stipends and travel awards. For our students, the result is the burden of loan debt, or the absolute necessity for overload teaching, or—most often—a combination of both.

Given this situation, administrators within and outside academic departments are obligated to assist those whose quality of life depends upon our wise and fair use of resources. Acting responsibly on students' behalf requires both willingness to master new forms of knowledge and a commitment to putting that knowledge into praxis. As graduate director, I've found that familiarity with budget operations—where funds originate and how they can be used—is the principal basis for being an effective steward; understanding the budget enables us to allocate and occasionally redistribute monies in ways that will benefit our students. Rethinking previous practices is essential, especially as fiscal circumstances change, and new guidelines and priorities regarding expenditures might have to be instituted. In our case, the goal of augmenting graduate stipends was achieved simply although it entailed a conscious change of procedure and a disciplined sense of purpose: making sure that enrollment figures exactly matched the number of tuition waivers allotted to us from the university allowed us to stop using departmental funds as a supplemental source of revenue for tuition. As a result, we could increase the stipends given to incoming students and students already enrolled in the program. Keeping within the budget and respecting the fiscal limits of our program did not result in retrenchment, but rather in greater attention to the well being of our students, each of whom received a more substantial share of departmental resources. Promoting professional development for graduate students also entails their learning to budget wisely: whenever possible, students themselves should be given a voice in determining how funds should be spent, since learning to establish feasible fiscal priorities is an essential part of their education. Students, for instance, could decide whether to disburse monies targeted for their professionalization on colloquia, travel, an in-house conference, or some combination of these choices; the budget planning and negotiating skills that accrue from this experience will prove invaluable to their careers.

Besides reviewing one's budget strategically to address specific goals, I've found that it helps to work collaboratively across budget units—or departments and colleges—whenever possible in order to assist graduate students. If some common objective can be identified, such as the purchase of research materials or funding for multi-disciplinary conferences and colloquia, funds from various units can be pooled and shared; this collaboration both fosters relationships among diverse communities within the university and relieves the strain on the budgets of particular departments. Conversely, sometimes resources must be hoarded, especially when the labor power of graduate students or post-doctoral fellows appears underused to cost-conscious administrators. Resisting attempts to increase the teaching load for these vulnerable groups preserves the mission and integrity of the department's graduate program although faculty members themselves are likely to pay for this resistance: the drive to minimize expenses and maximize efficiency might mean that faculty must teach more classes or more students in order for graduate students to teach fewer. Balancing our need to preserve time for professional activity with graduate students' ability to develop their research and pedagogical skills will require difficult and honest conversations with our colleagues and will test our commitment to acting upon the principles we endorse.

In periods of continued financial uncertainty, women in administrative roles—many of them new to their jobs—face the challenge of performing in circumstances that shift along with variations in university revenues and enrollments; we also find ourselves struggling to mentor graduate students whose professional lives might bear little resemblance to our own. Yet although the structure of higher education is changing in response to hard times, the needs of our students

remain fairly constant: a living wage, opportunities to participate in the community of scholars, and access to the resources their projects require. Our ability and willingness to meet these needs will determine how successfully the next generation of scholars will perform.