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**UNIVERSITIES AND THE FUTURE OF WORK: THE PROMISE OF LABOR STUDIES**

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**ABSTRACT**

There continues to be widespread anxiety about the future of work. I recently proposed a labor studies perspective on how to understand and meet undeniable challenges. This follow-up paper explores the implications of my analysis for the contemporary American academy, reflecting on how labor studies can help enlist public research universities in support of building a human-centered world of work. American universities have long been intricate bundles of contradictions, but recent trends have left them at a crossroads: Will they be able to reform and connect with a progressive reading of the original land-grant vision to support a future in the interest of workers? Or will their practices further drift away from a public-serving mission as they succumb to neoliberal expectations? This paper contends that the three constitutive features of labor studies—its focus on people’s struggles, interdisciplinarity, and upholding workers’ rights—illuminate crucial steps for realizing much-needed innovations in support of revaluing both work and workers.

**Keywords:** Future of Work, Labor Studies, Universities, Valuation, Innovation

There continues to be widespread anxiety about the future of work. Facing the multiple systemic crises of contemporary societies head on, I have made the case for a labor studies perspective on analyzing current challenges and shaping the future (Schulze-Cleven 2021). My original intervention called for the revaluation of work and workers as a means to increase sustainability and safeguard democracy. Moreover, I emphasized the importance of collective action and the contribution of institutional innovation in the realm of reproductive work—labor efforts from care to education that sustain the reproduction of society—for realizing this goal of revaluation. In this paper, I look forward and inward, exploring the implications of my contentions for higher education. Acknowledging my earlier analysis as a product of the contemporary American academy, I reflect on how labor studies can help enlist public research universities in support of building a human-centered future of work.

The impact of universities on the future of work is a pressing issue. On the one hand, there is strong agreement among policy makers that universities have much to contribute to effectively addressing contemporary economic, political, and environmental crises. Given that universities are central nodes in the global knowledge economy, their teaching, research, and outreach missions serve essential roles in socioeconomic adjustment. One account even claims that the country’s land-grant institutions—the “people’s universities” as Abraham Lincoln called them—are “perhaps democracy’s best hope” (Gavazzi and Gee 2018). Universities’ mission statements echo these sentiments, frequently emphasizing excellence in the service of the public good. Whether it is supporting students’ social mobility by improving their employment prospects or offering attractive working conditions to their own employees, universities frequently herald their constructive role in building a future that serves their various constituencies as well as the public interest. Many universities are clearly trying to deliver on these lofty goals and ideals.

On the other hand, there is significant skepticism about whether universities—as they are currently constituted—are sufficiently living up to their potential and stated intentions (e.g., Childress 2019; Newfield 2016). Critics have drawn up long lists of complaints about contemporary American higher education. On the political left, complaints focus on the role played by a differentiated university landscape in reproducing—and even increasing—social stratification, the tendency of university management to replace

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secure tenure-track employment with low-paid and precarious gig work, the contribution of rising tuition to the financialization of workers' lives, and the academy's enmeshment in processes of cultural and political colonialization. Commentators on the right, meanwhile, disparage universities as bastions of privilege on the wrong side of the "culture wars." They charge "liberal" professors with having allowed political correctness to run amok as they accommodate students' requests for "safe spaces" and "trigger warnings," threatening free speech and undermining American patriotism in the process. Even if one resists buying into any particular criticism and continues to acknowledge the many positive contributions of contemporary universities, it is hard to deny that their aspirations frequently outstrip reality.

It is important to acknowledge the uncomfortable realities that have underpinned skepticism toward universities. Facing up to contemporary tensions within and around academia is the first step in better addressing them. Of course, universities have long been intricate bundles of contradictions, but recent trends have clearly left American universities—and public research institutions in particular—at a crossroads: Will they be able to reform and connect with a progressive reading of the original land-grant vision to support a future in the interest of workers? Or will their practices further drift away from a public-serving mission as they succumb to neoliberal expectations, moving toward an ever-deeper intertwining with the private sector and sustained deskilling of university labor?

Reforming universities with a focus on meeting collective needs and providing equality of individual opportunity will be an uphill struggle. Returning to the "good old days" is hardly a promising strategy, for while college was once more affordable for the average student and employment security was higher for many faculty, gender and racial barriers also greatly restricted who benefited. Moreover, given the changing political, economic, and ecological contexts, simply defending current organizational forms will do little to stop ongoing institutional drift. Rather, just as with respect to reproductive labor more generally, real innovations are needed. While labor studies cannot offer any quick-fix "solutions" to the contemporary crisis in higher education, the field can provide intellectual and practical guidance on how to support the revaluation of work and workers through institutional reforms in the sector. Below, I first elaborate on the contemporary crisis and then turn to the contribution of labor studies in addressing it.

### **AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES AT A CROSSROADS**

Higher education has long played an outsized role in the provision of social citizenship in the United States. Following World War II, the G.I. Bill supported the higher education of returning soldiers, solidifying the country's international leadership in "massifying" higher education. While most of the early beneficiaries of federal financial support were White and male, higher education became more inclusive over time. For instance, the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the Higher Education Act of 1965, and the passage of Title IX in 1972 opened up higher education to women, who now make up the majority of students in colleges and universities (Rose 2018).

Publicly supported access to higher education has underpinned the social mobility of many people, and providing such opportunities continues to be a point of identification and satisfaction for many faculty, administrators, and staff. At my home institution, Rutgers–New Brunswick, many of my colleagues take pride in providing a high-quality university education for a large number of first-generation students and empowering them to climb the social ladder. As the university's communications department emphasizes, about 30 percent of Rutgers–New Brunswick students receive Pell grants (i.e., federally funded partial tuition scholarships for low-income students); in addition, "Rutgers' four- and six-year graduation rates are 24 percent and 21 percent above the national average, [while] ... its graduation rate for Black students is 38 percent higher" (Buccino 2021). Seeking to increase accessibility, universities have expanded offerings in online instruction, including massive open online courses (MOOCs) aimed at nontraditional students (Stevens 2018). Although the effective implementation of MOOCs has proven to be difficult, given that the least prepared students usually most need the personal attention of faculty, online courses can still be a productive step in efforts to support a democratic and sustainable future of work. And yet far too many aspects of higher education today undermine the goal of centering workers' concerns in building the future of work.

#### *Neoliberalism in Higher Education*

The rise of neoliberalism in particular has left an indelible mark on the university sector. It is not that higher education—including its distinct functions of creating, sharing, and certifying knowledge—has been devalued. Quite to the contrary, as policy makers increasingly turned to markets, they embraced the power of higher education in the service of an expanding range of policy goals. Inspired by economists' human capital theory, education has become the one-size-fits-all solution to drive economic growth and support social integration, merging concerns that once motivated separate industrial and welfare policies (Stedward 2003). Yet this expansion of purpose also implied a significant narrowing in the understanding of education's transformative potential. As public discourses deemphasized the contributions of universities to cultural and political development, higher education has come to be viewed primarily as a means to improve the employability of individuals and the national competitiveness of countries. With day-to-day practices across colleges and universities shifting to emphasize the commodity character of education, the sector has

become deeply implicated in neoliberalism's market-based transformation of social relations (Schulze-Cleven, Reitz, Maesse, and Angermuller 2017).

This transformation of higher education is part of a broader shift in welfare-state policy making, which has weakened workers' social protections from market forces and embraced the provision of "welfare through work," a reorientation frequently likened to a shift from the de-commodification of workers to their hyper-commodification (Lessenich 2008). Rather than treating people primarily as citizens, neoliberal public policies have come to view them both as suppliers of human capital (i.e., production inputs) and as sources of market demand. Reconceived as entrepreneurially oriented lifelong learners, individuals are expected to continually adapt their skill sets to changing economic demands, including by tapping into the ever more differentiated offerings that public policies encourage universities to provide (Jenson and Saint-Martin 2006; Schulze-Cleven 2011, 2020).

#### *Stratification: Tuition and Debt*

In the United States, with public funding significantly lagging the sector's expansion, many students now pay for (or at least co-finance) their college and university educations. The greater reliance on private—as opposed to public—funding is typically rationalized with reference to students' ability to reap the individual rewards of such investment in skill acquisition through higher earnings. Yet, given the differential financial endowments of students and their families, increases in tuition prices well above inflation have turned college from a potential equalizer of life chances into what one critic recently called the "great unleveler" (Mettler 2014): While the cost of attending a four-year public university increased only slightly from 6 percent to 9 percent of a family's annual income for the top fifth of the income spectrum between 1971 and 2010, for the bottom fifth of the income spectrum, it nearly tripled, from 42 percent to 114 percent. In line with relative college affordability, three fourths of affluent adults (i.e., those from the highest quartile of family income) graduate with a bachelor's degree by the time they are 24 years old, but graduation rates drop to one in three, fewer than one in five, and less than one in ten in each consecutive lower-income quartile. Of course, tuition is not the only factor driving these outcomes, and actual expenses frequently diverge from universities' sticker prices. Nevertheless, the social stratification of the student body in higher education is undeniable, particularly with respect to graduation rates, as opposed to mere attendance rates.

With under-resourced students attending high-charging universities, taking on debt has become a prominent feature of getting a university education. Nationally, the growth in the volume of outstanding student loans to \$1.6 trillion in 2020 is widely viewed as a bubble. Having tripled over 13 years, the volume of student debt now eclipses credit card debt and car loans, remaining second only to mortgage debt. The chances of repayment are often slight for the 43 million borrowers. That is particularly true for those who fell prey to underdelivering, vocationally oriented programs offered by for-profit education companies, which frequently have extremely low graduation rates. Bankrolled by the government via federally sponsored student loans and grants, for-profit institutions came to enroll one in ten American undergraduates in 2009. Even at nonprofit colleges, nearly two thirds of graduating students had taken out student loans in 2019, leaving them with an average balance of almost \$30,000, excluding borrowing by their parents. Last year, more than seven million student loan borrowers were in default, with almost two million additional borrowers having seriously fallen behind in payments (Lieber and Bernard 2020). Of borrowers who started college in 1995, only 41.3 percent had successfully paid off their student loans without defaulting two decades later (Woo et al. 2017: 12).

Graduate students in professional degree programs—including business, law, and medicine—often take on particularly high debt loads, which many observers see as less of a problem given these students' frequently very good earnings prospects. But, even here, not all is well. Take, for instance, the effects of the federal income-based loan repayment program. As currently formulated, it exempts income up to 150 percent of federal poverty guidelines adjusted for household size, limits payments to 10 percent of annual income above the exemption and offers loan forgiveness after 20 years (ten years if the debtor is employed in public service). These conditions allow many professionals, including those earning six-figure salaries, not to repay all of their loans. Consequently, the program not only encourages more borrowing, but it is also likely to make students less price sensitive and permit universities to further increase tuition (Delisle, Holt, and Blagg 2015). Moreover, these graduates' extreme debt levels continue to provide rationalizations for well-above-average annual increases in many professionals' salaries, which are already driving up income inequality in society. Admittedly, progress has been made in increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the student loan system, with federal legislation in 2010 cutting out commercial banks and redirecting the savings to need-based financial aid. Yet some of the system's provisions remain quite punitive, including the barriers to disposing of crushing student loan debt through personal bankruptcy.

#### *Internal Transformations*

As signaled by popular critiques of universities' "corporatization" and diagnoses of movement toward "academic capitalism," the contemporary transformation of higher education extends deep into institutions themselves (e.g., Schrecker 2010; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). From universities' management of academic labor to their strategies for gaining competitive advantage, practices in the academy increasingly mirror those pursued by private companies outside of education, many of which have fissured long-

term employment relationships by reorganizing themselves around perceived core competences. Highlighted in descriptions of the “Uberfication” of the university and the rise of the “gig academy,” there are even parallels to vanguard platform firms such as Uber and Amazon (Hall 2016; Kezar, DePaola, and Scott 2019). Universities have yet to match the abilities of those companies to source labor with high levels of control at low prices and to leverage market domination for rent extraction (Rahman and Thelen 2019). Nevertheless, the short lengths of many academic labor contracts, universities’ embrace of technology, and their “knowledge hub” branding strategies all point in this direction. Paralleling developments in the private sector, neoliberal modes of imagining work within the university have reconceived academic labor in terms of faculty entrepreneurialism, thereby replacing self-conceptions anchored in professional, unionist, or vocational norms (Steffen 2020).

Faculty pay has become considerably more dispersed since the 1980s. Research-focused faculty have often done quite well financially, but there are large disciplinary gaps. Professional fields such as law, business, medicine, and engineering tend to offer the highest salaries, well ahead of the hard sciences, where the ability to get outside grants has become crucial. Positions in the humanities usually pay the worst, particularly given the amount of education required. Growing cross-disciplinary inequality tends to be most visible in salaries for new assistant professors, with data for four-year colleges showing that those in business now earn almost twice as much as those in English or history (Jaschik 2016).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, teaching—the labor activity generating the tuition revenues on which universities rely—is increasingly provided by lower-paid faculty off the tenure track who tend to work on short-term and part-time contracts, frequently without social benefits such as health insurance. Crucially, women and people of color are disproportionately represented in these highly contingent positions (Nzingo 2020).

Admittedly, the declining share of tenure-track employment in higher education has been a feature of the American academy for decades. This trend has been driven by declining per-student financial support from state governments, the growing dependence of universities on tuition income, and the introduction of new budgeting models such as “responsibility-centered management.” It also reflects a long-standing pattern across society of trying to meet new functional challenges by unbundling tasks, moving toward a deeper division of labor, and allowing for greater specialization. Finally, it highlights and exacerbates the professoriate’s decreasing collective power within universities, with the trend’s unbridled continuation acting to weaken tenure as one of the central institutional pillars of faculty voice. Some observers interpret the associated flow of authority to university administration as merely a return to historical patterns (Bowen and Tobin 2015). That said, there is something distinctly new about contemporary shifts, not least because they have been accompanied by compensation increases for top administrators in particular, mirroring trends in the private sector where the average CEO to worker pay ratio has skyrocketed in recent decades.

Contemporary power relations in the American academy were on open display when COVID-19 hit in spring 2020. Responding to decreasing income—from tuition, auxiliary services such as housing, and state appropriations—universities embraced austerity and cutbacks. Many froze promised pay increases or retirement contributions for faculty and staff, and some even laid off tenured faculty. Adjunct faculty often did not see their contracts renewed. Although the cost savings of the latter move were often minimal, it was expedient and did not require management to renege on contractual obligations. In turn, while adjuncts as the most casualized parts of the academic workforce frequently had the least capacity for resilience during the pandemic-induced recession, they often were expected to make the greatest sacrifices.

#### *The Changing Boundaries of Public and Private*

Unsurprisingly, the for-profit companies active in higher education have been most radical in economizing on labor (Schulze-Cleven 2017). Offering no tenure-track employment at all, for-profit universities have tended to spend far more on marketing than on instruction, with some also excelling in using peer evaluations to place the burden of grading work on the student-customers themselves. For a while, the boom of online education and the growth of the adult market provided these companies with high profits. Yet, under the impact of investigations into fraud against both students and public authorities, some for-profit entities faced heavy fines, prominent businesses closed, and enrollment has declined significantly. Searching for ways to maintain accreditation and protect profits, big for-profit players such as Kaplan University and Bridgeport Education have since reinvented themselves as service platforms for nonprofit institutions seeking to open up new revenue streams in the online adult market.

This strategic reorientation fundamentally challenges former organizational boundaries in higher education, as well as the goals and practices attributed to different players within the sector. Private companies have entered into agreements with “hundreds of public and private nonprofit colleges”—Harvard, Yale, NYU, and Georgetown included—to provide marketing, recruitment, and technology services for university-branded online programs, “in exchange for a cut of revenues as high as 70 percent” (Carey 2020). Two public research universities have gone even further, incorporating large parts of for-profit companies into their organizations. In April 2018, Purdue University acquired the for-profit Kaplan University and used it to launch Purdue University Global (Lieberman 2019). Similarly, the University of Arizona Global Campus (UAGC) bought the for-profit Ashford University, which was once the core of scandal-plagued Bridgeport Education. Now rebranded as Zovio, Ashford’s former parent company also provides recruiting and marketing services for UAGC in exchange for tuition sharing (Carey 2020).

University managers have defended such partnerships and hybridization as supporting their public outreach mission and offering crucial levers to design a more socially inclusive “new American university” (Crow and Dabars 2015). Yet this approach comes with serious questions about both the quality of educational offerings and labor standards—including intellectual property protections—for academic workers. The use of pre-recorded lectures in online teaching is a case in point. Given their increasing role and essentially costless transfer, it is logical that universities would seek to tap into economies of scale. A recent story from Concordia University in Canada highlights the problematic potential implications of such practices: When the university’s in-person classes were moved online in response to COVID-19, students were—unbeknownst to them—served recorded lectures by a deceased professor who had created them for a previously offered online course (Kneese 2021).

### *Higher Education and Social Power*

Finally, it is important to underscore the contributions of contemporary universities to sustaining existing social hierarchies, including White supremacy. Universities and colleges have long played a role in engendering and upholding societies’ patterns of racial domination. They did so most fundamentally by legitimating particular bodies of knowledge, but the links were frequently more direct. Many of the early American colleges benefited financially from slavery (Fuentes and White 2016; Wilder 2013). Moreover, the original land grants for America’s public colleges were made possible by violence against and theft from Indigenous peoples that had inhabited land that the federal government granted to states for the purpose of expanding higher education. As critics emphasize, universities today remain “*large systems of authoritative control*,” acting through “standardization, gradation, accountancy, classification, credits and penalties” (Mbembe 2016: 30, emphasis in original).<sup>2</sup> In these functions, they all too often fail to significantly challenge the multiple interlinked “forms of dehumanization, oppression, and exploitation” associated with capitalism, racism, and sexism (Maldonado-Torres 2012: 93).

Arguably, awareness of the university’s role in sustaining and reproducing particular power structures has increased in some circles, particularly as post-colonial thought, feminism, and the Black radical tradition (e.g., Baldwin 1984; Chakrabarty 2008; Fanon 1967) have found broader audiences. Yet, while long-standing biases—including the conceptual foundations and empirical foci of entire academic fields and curricula, such as classics and Western civilization—are being recognized (e.g., Poser 2021), the realization of inclusive day-to-day practices in higher education remains a work in progress, whether with respect to race, gender, or class (e.g., Casselman 2021). Student consumerism, for instance, has frequently reinforced biases and discrimination against women faculty of color (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, and Harris 2012; Niemann, Gutiérrez y Muhs, and González 2020). Moreover, although universities have typically defended affirmative action in favor of historically disadvantaged groups, societies’ embrace of “color blind” market rationales has frequently given legitimacy to conservative skeptics of actions that seek to counter long-standing patterns of subjugation. At the same time, neoliberal discourses and reforms have empowered for-profit corporations’ targeting of “prospective students whose aspirations outstrip their available options for mobility” (Cottom 2017: 21), many of whom have been—given the stark racial wealth gap in the United States today—people of color.

Particularly in the past few years, there has been real progress in recognizing the value of diversity in higher education. But reform initiatives in the name of diversity without attention to equity and inclusion can remain “detached from histories of struggle for equality” and fail to challenge unequal distributions of resources (Ahmed 2007: 235). Moreover, if these programs do not seek to address claims about the historically grounded “colonialization of knowledge,” they will not overcome some groups’ perceptions of themselves as universities’ “subaltern subjects” within a system likened to “neopapartheid” (Maldonado-Torres 2012: 91–93).<sup>3</sup>

## **UNIVERSITIES, LABOR STUDIES, AND THE FUTURE OF WORK**

Given the complexity of the contemporary research university, including its service to a wide range of constituencies and its associated extension into many different parts of contemporary society, it is probably inevitable that it has multifaceted—even contradictory—effects on the future of work and workers. As early as the mid-1960s, the modern university appeared to have morphed into a “multiversity,” and the growth of higher education since then has only promoted further “structural accretion”—i.e., the addition of functions without abandoning old ones (Kerr 1963; Smelser 2013). But there is ample scope to strengthen universities as forces of liberation (rather than instruments of domination) with respect to the future of work, in line with a progressive land-grant mission (Goldstein, Paprocki, and Osborne 2019). Simply embracing a labor studies frame will clearly not be sufficient for propelling forward much-needed innovations in support of revaluing work and workers, but it points to crucial steps for getting there.

Each of the three central features of labor studies—its focus on the struggles of working people, its practice of interdisciplinarity, and its normative commitment to upholding workers’ rights—comes into play. As I have argued elsewhere, labor studies has a strong edge over other approaches in informing debate on the future of work (Schulze-Cleven 2021). Not only does the field bring into focus how institutions shape the character of distributional conflicts, but it also clarifies how collective action can productively address such conflicts in the name of realizing democratic values and increasing sustainability.

*Productive Focus Within Analytical Breadth*

The first payoff of labor studies is analytical. The field's interdisciplinarity allows for a broad perspective that incorporates insights from different and often siloed scholarly communities. From historical scholarship, the labor studies lens takes an appreciation of universities as crucial vehicles for the state and its citizens to relate to one another, with individual institutions serving as "parastates" that convey state interests by proxy (Loss 2014). The grounding of labor studies analyses in the actual historical record, moreover, guards against glorifying the past when seeking to illuminate contemporary tensions.

Economics provides labor studies with a recognition of cost dynamics in higher education. Given that higher education has long been a labor-intensive service, a fate it shares with other at least partially state-financed services (such as care for the ill, elderly, and children), annual productivity improvements at universities have lagged the more capital-intensive manufacturing sector. Representing a case of "Baumol's cost disease," this means that economy-wide wage increases tend to drive up the relative cost of higher education and other welfare state services, putting strong pressure on public budgets (Baumol 1967). Moreover, "Bowen cost effects" capture how universities tend to collect and spend as much money as possible in an attempt to rise within the university pecking order through investments in research prowess, real estate, and college sports (Bowen 1980).

From sociology, labor studies draws an understanding of universities' centrality to social organization and the peculiarities of their governance. Specifically, universities continue to act as "sieves for sorting and stratifying populations, incubators for the development of competent social actors, temples for the legitimation of official knowledge, and hubs connecting multiple institutional domains" (Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008: 127). At the same time, they have retained "a substantial margin of jurisdiction over their own boundaries and internal affairs," with professional and associational governance curbing the effects of market pressures and government steering (Clark 1983; Eaton and Stevens 2020: 1; Stevens and Gebre-Medhin 2016).

Political science scholarship, finally, offers labor studies a handle on the interactions of different mechanisms for processing distributional conflicts—e.g., electoral politics, lobbying and interest group politics, collective bargaining, and social movement mobilization—and an awareness of the central role that the fiscal and regulatory strategies of states play in producing different varieties of academic capitalism (Schulze-Cleven 2017, 2020; Schulze-Cleven and Olson 2017).

Beyond incorporating these various disciplinary insights, labor studies has one crucial advantage: Its focus on work and workers allows for an analytical perspective that bridges a common division of scholarship in higher education between its changing relationship to society on the one hand and its internal transformation on the other. More specifically, labor studies can connect a demand-side student-centered lens (i.e., analyses of how the structural transformation of higher education is shaped by or affects the sector's "customers") and a supply-side faculty-centered lens (i.e., analyses that explore the changing fate and organizational politics of "providers"). Both the students that seek to leverage higher education for successful careers and the faculty (and other staff) that labor within the sector are workers. Given the normative commitment of labor studies to universal worker dignity, the field does not prioritize the fate of either group of workers but instead recognizes the increased precarity of both. While university management likes to emphasize that there are zero-sum distributional conflicts between academic workers and students, with wage increases for university staff and faculty automatically translating into tuition increases for students, labor studies shifts the focus to exploring the role that solidaristic collective action can play in designing positive-sum approaches to the challenges and problems discussed above.

*Analysis-Based Practice*

For many scholars of labor studies, this analytical orientation spills over into—and is fueled by—a practical orientation, whether in the classroom or in community-serving outreach activities. In line with the classic definition of publicly engaged scholarship, labor studies faculty tend to not merely reach out to different disciplinary publics but frequently also connect with broader publics outside of the university (Boyer [1990] 1997). Engaging these publics via "action research" that leverages the deepening of knowledge for advancing social justice (Levin and Greenwood 2017), labor studies seeks to empower underprivileged sections of the population in particular. Obviously, not all fields can take this approach, but there is arguably scope to bolster university-community linkages in this spirit.

At Rutgers' School of Management and Labor Relations, for instance, labor studies faculty have embraced this publicly engaged approach through a variety of centers, including the Center for Women & Work and the Program for Disability Research among others.<sup>4</sup> Frequently collaborating with the school's labor-focused continuing education arm, the Labor Education Action Research Network, the centers have laid important groundwork for pushing the conversation on the future of work in a worker-centered direction. The centers' findings, from sectoral bargaining for the common good to the scope for climate justice at work, have been widely shared.

Three of the centers have been particularly active with respect to higher education's contribution to the future of work. Research at the Center for Global Work and Employment has probed the cross-national politics driving higher education reform, and the Education & Employment Research Center has evaluated education policy outcomes in the United States. Meanwhile, the Center for Innovation in Worker Organization has played a leading national role in convening stakeholders and facilitating knowledge transfer on "bargaining for the common good" in higher education.

It is a promising development that university leaders around the country are increasingly seeking to recommit higher education to public engagement, including by better recognizing the importance of such engagement in decisions about faculty promotions (Cantor 2020; O'Meara 2018). Such moves validate the founding principles of labor studies. The same is true for the growing recognition of how contemporary economic, political, and ecological crises have grown the scope for "post-normal" science that moves beyond academia's ivory tower in general and disciplinary silos in particular (Krauss, Schäfer, and von Storch 2012). As uncertainty has increased, so has the need for the kind of normatively anchored, theoretically integrated, problem-focused and context-sensitive scholarship that labor studies offers (Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons 2001; Wallerstein 1999).

This is not to deny the labor studies field's own challenges. For instance, as labor studies focused on issues of class, it frequently failed to pay sufficient attention to the ineluctably racial character of capitalism (e.g., Du Bois [1946] 1969; Robinson 1983) and the mutual amplification of different forms of oppression (e.g., Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw [1993] 2018; McGhee 2021). Yet this is changing. As Naomi R Williams and Sheri Davis-Faulkner argue, the embrace of an analytical lens informed by critical theorizing on race and intersectionality puts the field at the forefront of developing revisionist narratives about both the past and the future (Williams and Davis-Faulkner 2021). Moreover, initiatives such as those spearheaded by Rutgers' School of Management and Labor Relations centers—and the Center for Innovation in Worker Organization in particular—translate such thinking into action. Spanning theory and practice, the interventions of labor studies faculty at the class-race-gender nexus provide actionable visions that can fill the potential vacuum created by exposing the biases of inherited forms of social organization. Addressing the fears of conservatives that it is easier to tear down collective standards than replace them with less-biased ones (e.g., Bauerlein 2020), this is a genuinely generative enterprise. Just like neighboring fields such as social work or public policy, labor studies can supply crucial ingredients for finding inclusive ways to define and pursue the "public good."

#### *Toward Solidaristic Reform*

With respect to higher education's impact on the future of work, labor studies can amplify progressive voices and help draw connections between the struggles of different groups of workers. Given the centrality of real-life stories for cultivating social change (Ganz 2009), directing attention to how contemporary universities shape different workers' struggles is crucial for spurring innovation in and around the university. Such discursive work can be accompanied by organization-building that seeks to forge new social coalitions in support of solidaristic reforms. The prospects for successfully using labor studies and public engagement in support of "cultivating growth at the leading edges" of higher education are arguably good (Eatman and Peters 2015). After all, significant social mobilization is already under way, as indicated by several examples:

- The "free college" movement and mobilization to relieve student debt (e.g., Eaton 2017; Samuels 2013).
- Union organizing, including the city-focused "metro strategy" spearheaded by the Service Employees International Union to improve the work conditions of adjuncts and the surge in attempts by the United Auto Workers and others to institutionalize the collective voice of graduate student workers (e.g., Berry and Worthen 2014).
- Recent cross-sectional mobilization for solidarity and anti-racism during the COVID-19 pandemic (Murch 2020), including faculty and graduate students at Rutgers joining the university's nonacademic workforce in advocating for a government-sponsored work-share approach, which would allow furloughed employees to recover lost income through temporarily increased partial unemployment benefits (Cohen 2020; Reitmeyer 2020).
- The turn to critical—and even "abolitionist"—university studies across the humanities (e.g., Boggs, Meyerhoff, Mitchell, and Schwartz-Weinstein, no date; Williams 2012) committed to resisting, disrupting, and subverting the spread of neoliberalism (Harney and Moten 2013; la paperson 2017).

In emphasizing the shared experiences of workers within and outside of the academy, labor studies can help define common ground and collective demands across the different streams of mobilization for change, as recently happened in a campaign for a "New Deal for Higher Education" in the context of COVID-19 (Kahn, Mittelstadt, and Levenstein 2020). Such a reform program would significantly contribute to a more equitable, democratic, and sustainable future of work.

At times, labor studies provides this support from a somewhat precarious position in the academy. Dedicated state allocations for labor centers at universities have frequently been attacked, resulting in many labor centers being eliminated. Moreover, there is little agreement on the best place for labor studies programs within universities, leaving them spread out across the social sciences, business schools, law schools, and independent units. Pressure to merge with other units rarely goes away completely, and units'



independence has frequently been maintained only by flanking traditional labor studies and industrial relations concerns with the expansion of curricular offerings in human resource management. At the same time, as Cedric de Leon, director of the Labor Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, recently emphasized, labor studies scholars have proven extremely adept at entrepreneurially exploiting contemporary higher education's "neoliberal predilections," whether it is by bringing in outside funding and tuition dollars to support organizational independence or by tapping into concerns with "social issues and identity politics to advance an intersectional approach to labor solidarity" (de Leon, personal communication).

Theoretically, practically, and even politically, there is thus much to build on. As university leaders respond to the rise of right-wing populism by calling on universities to reassert their values and build community (e.g., Holloway 2020a, 2020b), they would be well advised to leverage the traditional strengths of labor studies. Moreover, policy makers outside of higher education could support such engagement. Just as they have used performance funding to drive the liberalization of the sector (Dougherty and Natow 2020), they could change course and incentivize universities' turn to public empowerment. Not only is it possible to enlist universities in support of the changes that I have argued are necessary for a human-centered future of work, but labor studies also offers crucial pointers on how to do so.

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**ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, in some fields, disproportionate increases in spending on junior faculty have reduced salary ratios across rank.

<sup>2</sup> For an earlier use of this characterization, see Veblen (1918: 221) who—more than a century ago—likened the “recourse to ... coercive control and standardization” in American universities to that “of a penal settlement.”

<sup>3</sup> Of course, even self-consciously “critical” scholarship on higher education can unwittingly shore up the very conditions it takes issue with within universities. Specifically, it may not connect to the concerns of the unrecognized—and potentially unassimilated—“undercommons” of universities, where counter-hegemonic behavior can create new possibilities through radical re-envisioning (Harney and Moten 2013).

<sup>4</sup> A full list of centers includes the Center for Global Work and Employment, the Center for Innovation in Worker Organization, the Center for the Study of Collaboration in Work and Society, the Center for Women & Work, the Center for Work & Health, the Education & Employment Research Center, the Institute for the Study of Employee Ownership and Profit Sharing, the NJ/NY Center for Employee Ownership, the Occupational Training and Education Consortium, and the Program for Disability Research.