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Fighting for justice in the neoliberal university: The promise of reflexive and flexible solidarity

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Abstract

In the American neoliberal university, faculty are encouraged to build strong connections in virtually every way except one: as workers. In this paper, we will discuss our experiences as leaders of the George Mason University chapter of the American Association of University Professors (GMU-AAUP), with a focus on our campaign to build a cross-campus labor coalition connecting faculty, students, staff, and contract workers in the struggle for economic and social justice. We will begin by examining the constellation of structural forces and professional hierarchies that amplify labor exploitation on campus, subvert shared governance and academic freedom, and cultivate a campus culture of disconnection, competition, and alienation. Finally, our conclusion will argue that addressing these long-standing and emergent threats to public higher education will require a project of flexible and reflexive solidarity. In this project, those who enjoy the most protections and resources will be called upon to leverage their power and join in solidarity with those marginalized by unequal systems to revitalize the university's public mission to serve the common good.

For academics, in the United States, the contemporary neoliberal university is an engine of disconnection. Before we even arrive on campus, our contracts divide us into categories: graduate assistants, graduate lecturers, part-time faculty, full-time term, and full-time tenure-line. These categories not only represent hierarchical orderings but also differentiate us by pay, precarity, job security, and access to power and resources–with real material consequences. We exist within units and colleges that also compete for resources, where we are constantly reminded that our individual and collective security depends on steadily increasing enrollments and external grant funding. We are told that this game—an entrepreneurial survival of the fittest—is ours to win or lose. None of us invented this game. Few of us entered the profession to market our "brands" and those of our programs. But as Omar Little from *The Wire* once put it, the game is out there. It's either play or get played. In this context, should it surprise anyone if faculty life is often marked by feelings of disconnection and discontent, isolation, mistrust, alienation, and exhaustion?

Yet the truth is that, despite the structural inequities in American higher education and the best efforts of administrators charged with dismantling the university, we remain deeply connected to one another. We care about our research and our teaching. We care about our colleagues, and we care about our students. But perhaps most fundamentally of all, we share the experience of being *workers* linked in a complex division of academic labor, where we are all, by varying degrees, harmed by the commodification of our labor and the subordination of our vocation to the cold calculus of efficiency and productivity.

These deep connections can be easily obscured by the grinding daily life of faculty labor within the neoliberal university. The symbolic divisions of discipline, vocation, status, pedigree, and prestige–

so central to the experience of American higher education–continue to play a daily and powerful role in shaping our sense of who has value, who should be respected, and who should be included or excluded from the community of scholars.[1] And when these symbolic divisions are intertwined with governance regimes that pit us against one another in a struggle for material resources, the pressure to disconnect, to compete, and to win becomes even harder to resist.

To address faculty disconnection, isolation, alienation, and burnout, university administrators lean into "self-care," mindfulness, and other modalities that place the burden of repair squarely on the shoulders of faculty workers. They develop multiple, overlapping initiatives designed to build professional connections between faculty and leverage these connections to advance the goals of increased productivity and enhanced individual "well-being." The solutions seldom address or even acknowledge the material conditions that generate feelings of alienation and burnout.

Our perspective is different. Rather than focus on individual well-being, a discourse that emerges from and reinforces neoliberal and capitalist regimes of labor exploitation, we instead argue that the only effective response to the disconnection, isolation, alienation, and exploitation of faculty is not mere connection but something much more demanding: *solidarity*.

But what does solidarity mean in the contemporary American university, particularly given the multiple, interlocked forms of oppression on campus that enable not just labor exploitation but also reproduce social hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, nation, and ability? What distinguishes solidarity from neoliberal discourses of connection and well-being? And, perhaps most importantly, what are the material and social barriers to building solidarity across a structurally divided and dispirited faculty, and how might these barriers be overcome through the intellectual and practical labor of faculty organizing?

To explore these questions, this article will draw on our experiences as leaders of GMU-AAUP, George Mason University's advocacy chapter of the American Association of University Professors. As will become clear, our story is not one of seamless growth and triumph. Although we are proud of our chapter's accomplishments, our story also features numerous setbacks and dead ends. Yet we also believe our experience pushing back against the material forces of privatization, exploitation, and separation at GMU, however modest, has reproduced a dynamic common across many struggles for social justice. Like most activists, we have found that it is only in the challenging of boundaries that the boundaries themselves, usually naturalized under layers of obfuscation and rhetorical misdirection, become visible. We have found, in short, that challenging embedded, material systems of power and privilege forces these systems to reveal themselves in all their structural and coercive glory. Mapping these systems of power, drawing on sociological and discursive theories of neoliberalism, is the goal of the first section of this article.

But actually doing something about these systems—taking risks, taking collective action, working as accomplices for justice—will require nurturing and extending acts of solidarity among and between all workers on campus, including contract workers, staff, graduate students, and faculty. We cannot individually achieve our way out of this mess, nor can we ethically or morally turn our backs on those most marginalized, exploited, and harmed by the system. No amount of individual well-being or yoga or deep breathing will save us. The only path forward to rebuilding a university devoted to the common good and the flourishing of all workers is solidarity. We will only win back the university if we collectively organize to win it back together. To this end, the concluding sections of the article draw on our experience as faculty organizers in GMU-AAUP to discuss three principles of collective action that can guide, however imperfectly, a broader and more sustained effort to build faculty and student power in American higher education.

Finally, before we begin in earnest, we should discuss two key caveats. First, following the example of Stuart Hall and Patricia Hill Collins, we have attempted to integrate questions of race and gender into our materialist analysis of faculty disconnection. As Hall (2018/1980) argues, multiple axes of social hierarchy and material dispossession–including class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and

1 For the balance of this article, we will use the term "faculty" to refer to all forms of instructional and research labor, including graduate research and teaching assistants, graduate lecturers, and part- and full-time professors of various ranks and categories. In doing so, we are following the AAUP's inclusive definition that is based on the premise that, at the university, we are "one faculty." For details, see Monnier (2017).

many others–are always deeply articulated with and intertwined to create what he called, following Althusser, a "structure in dominance." For her part, from a less explicitly materialist position, Patricia Hill Collins (2017) offers an intersectional framework for conceptualizing how multiple forms of oppression intertwine in specific historical moments to produce a "matrix of domination." We recognize, however, that our efforts at tracing these complex articulations in American higher education are not fully developed in this paper. Yet, we hope we have made a modest contribution to the discourse.

Second, although faculty across the world often face similar challenges when confronting the processes of corporatization and privatization,[2] we should also note that the discussion below focuses almost entirely on the American context, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of faculty teaching in large public universities with significant graduate student populations. Academics working in other national and organizational contexts no doubt confront a set of challenges that differ in many ways from those we discuss below. For this reason, we offer this article to our colleagues working in other contexts in a spirit of humility and with the hope that they will find our analyses at least somewhat helpful as they attempt to protect the values of openness, equality, shared governance, and academic freedom at their own universities.

On Neoliberalism: Political Economy and Subjectivity

The literature on neoliberalism is vast and diffuse, with multiple definitions and applications across multiple disciplines (Ganti 2014). Overall, though, we believe it is useful to think about neoliberalism as a concept woven from three distinct but intertwined threads—the economic, the political, and the discursive.

In the first thread, neoliberalism refers to a now-dominant regime of capitalist accumulation that sought to restore conditions for capitalist economic growth after the crisis of postwar Fordism, principally by attacking forms of worker solidarity and state regulation that resist maximum rates of labor exploitation (Amin 1994; Harvey 2007). The development of new communication and information technologies played a decisive role, allowing capital to respond to uncertain and competitive markets by exploding the vertically integrated industrial firms of high Fordism into complex constellations of smaller firms stretching across the globe (Castells 2009). Linked by temporary contracts, these production networks linked together otherwise isolated units of labor, with business services proffered by high-skill, high-wage workers in "global cities" and routine production outsourced to low-wage export production zones (Sassen 1991).

As Harvey (1989) writes, the key principle at work in the neoliberal regime of accumulation is "flexibility." Networks of firms coalesce to take advantage of temporary opportunities for generating profit, then dissolve just as quickly when the window of profitability begins to close. Importantly, in this "flexible" neoliberal regime, relations between workers and firms are thoroughly transformed. The once common experience of job security and lifetime employment under postwar Fordism fades into myth (Pugh 2015). Instead, workers are told they must become "flexible" themselves, that is, to be ready at a moment's notice to reinvent themselves in order to meet the ever-shifting needs of employers (Ross 2004). To be "flexible" as a worker in neoliberalism, therefore, is to be precarious, anxious, and forever insecure (Dyer-Witheford 2015).

Other work on neoliberalism develops a second thread—the political. As regulation theory suggests, all regimes of accumulation must be accompanied by a distinctive *mode of regulation* that works to stabilize the inherent contradictions of capitalism and thus promote the regime's social reproduction over time (Brenner and Glick 1991). This is where we encounter the distinctive character of the neoliberal state, as developed, for example, by scholars writing on the rise of Thatcherism in the UK (Hall 2017).

Although it can take somewhat different forms, the neoliberal state attempts to promote capitalist

2 See the following for discussions of the neoliberal university in other national contexts, including Canada, Ethiopia, the Netherlands, Sweden, Turkey, and the UK (Dinibutun, Kuzeym and Dinc 2020; Fleming 2021; Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh 2015; Harris 2005; Ideland and Serder 2023; McKeown 2022; Reuter 2021; Shore 2008; Siyum 2022; Tekin S. 2003).

logic—individualism, competition, and the equation of accumulation with the social good—both laterally and vertically throughout society. Laterally, the state attempts to reduce or eliminate all "friction" that might slow or impede the spread and intensification of capitalist accumulation, including any environmental regulations, labor protections, attempts at collective bargaining, and any other restrictions that impinge on the freedom of "property" (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Harvey 2007). Vertically, the state commits to aiding the penetration of capitalist relations into realms of life once sealed off or protected from the logic of accumulation, including especially within civil society (Dean 2010; Rose 1990). This is where we have seen nearly 50 years of neoliberal policies that sell off collective resources (infrastructure, natural resources, etc.) while also privatizing public services like pensions, health care, and public education (Harvey 2007). The faith is that if we organize all social relations around capitalist logics of property, individualism, and competition, and if we push all risks and rewards onto individuals rather than collectives, the social good will emerge naturally via the apocryphal "invisible hand" (Buchanan and Tullock 1999; Friedman 2020/1962). The virtuous will be rewarded, the idle will be punished, and all resources will be devoted to their "highest and best" use.

Finally, beginning in the late 1990s in the English-speaking world, scholarly work on the economics and politics of neoliberalism began to be supplemented by a third thread of research, one that focused on the distinctive forms of subjectivity and identity that have emerged in the post-Fordist, neoliberal era (Ouellette and Hay 2008).

Overall, this work on "the neoliberal subject" looks not to Marx but to Foucault for inspiration, focusing especially on Foucault's late-career work on "governmentality" (Dean 2010). As Foucault argued, governmentality is a form of social power that operates at a different register than sovereignty (the power of state coercion) and discipline (power exerted within institutions). Instead, governmentality works to mold and shape subjects from a distance, eschewing coercion or discipline in favor of modeling, education, and persuasion (Lemke 2019). Importantly, this "molding" of subjects emanates from agents from multiple social locations, including the state, yes, but also, and more powerfully, from organizations in civil society, including the media, publishing, popular entertainment, the helping professions, and religious communities (Rose 1990). The goal of "government," in this more expansive sense, is the "conduire des conduites" (or "the conduct of conduct") through discourse, principally through interventions that encourage subjects to adopt self-conceptions and habits of behavior aligned with specific models of ideal selfhood (Foucault 1994: 237).

Drawing on these concepts of governmentality and subjectivity, multiple scholars have shown how various organizations and social actors, mostly within civil society and the private sector, have cultivated a widespread and now culturally dominant model of ideal selfhood: *the neoliberal subject* (Brown 2015). Generally, within this literature, the ideal neoliberal subject is presented as entrepreneurial, self-disciplined, and focused on individual achievement (Ouellette and Hay 2008; Pugh 2015; Wilson and Yochim 2017). If life is understood as a competition for scarce opportunities and resources, *the neoliberal subject intends to win*, including "winning" at school, at work, and even in relationships, as happens when one "trades up" for "better" friends and romantic partners (Dardot and Laval 2014). This ideal neoliberal subject views life through the categories of capitalist accumulation. New skills, forms of education, and even social connections are "investments" in one's "brand," meant to increase one's store of "human capital," which can then be exchanged for other strategic resources, including better jobs, new careers, and enhanced social standing (Goldin 2016; Hund 2023). Perhaps most importantly, the neoliberal subject in its purest form is free of obligations to others, liberated from collective responsibilities, and beholden to no one (Brown 2015).

Without a prime mover, without a singular agent "pulling the strings," these powerful economic, political, and cultural threads have, in the last thirty years, intertwined in relations of mutual reinforcement (Hall and Shea 2013). The emergence of neoliberal regimes of capitalist accumulation undermines the material security of workers across the global capitalist landscape. At the same moment, neoliberal policymakers relentlessly attack all sources of collective security and solidarity (social insurance, social housing, food assistance, collective bargaining) that might buttress workers against the corrosive effects of capitalist creative destruction. And finally, from within this landscape of precarity and

insecurity, multiple actors, from integrative therapists to TikTok influencers, engage in parallel projects of governmentality, offering their followers a vision of a "new you," a vision of an ideal, entrepreneurial "self" who can not only survive but indeed *thrive* in a never-ending contest of all-against-all (Wilson and Yochim 2017; Hund 2023).

American colleges and universities have not been sheltered from the destabilizing forces of neoliberalism, far from it. Indeed, the whole concept of a "public university" has been under a sustained assault, with its public mission–producing knowledge and educating students for the common good–increasingly threadbare and frayed by decades of neoliberal governance. Neoliberal logics dominate the field of higher education everywhere, defining students as consumers, professors as exploitable labor, and a college degree as an individual investment in one's "human capital" (Fleming 2021).

In the next section, we show how these intertwined economic, political, and discursive logics of neoliberalism have shaped and reshaped both the material conditions of faculty work in American universities and our own professional self-understandings of what being a "faculty member" means. We do this by suggesting that the contemporary neoliberal university is constituted by multiple *engines of disconnection*. Taken together, these engines work tirelessly to isolate and divide faculty by redefining intellectual life as a competitive quest for individual achievement and prestige, and in so doing, these engines undermine the material and social conditions necessary for relations of faculty solidarity to grow and take hold.

Engine of Disconnection I: Neoliberalism and the Entrepreneurial Professor

As noted above, one of the distinguishing features of neoliberalism as a regime of accumulation is to create competitive markets in all areas of life, including social fields once sheltered from market forces. The argument is that setting up a competition for scarce resources (space, time, money, and status) will not only determine the best use of these resources but will also discipline the competitors into becoming the most self-actualized, most accomplished versions of themselves. In short, out of the crucible of competition will emerge an ideal neoliberal subject–an entrepreneurial or "edu-preneurial" subject focused on individual achievement and advancement (Idleland and Serder 2023).

This is the idea, at least. In practice, of course, these competitions are never equal to begin with, and they inevitably amplify the maldistribution of resources and the hardening of status and prestige hierarchies into caste-like forms. Moreover, actual human beings can and do refuse to adopt the subject positions proffered by institutions, so perfectly realized entrepreneurial subjects may be difficult to find (Watts 2022). Even so, neither these negative outcomes nor the subtle resistance of faculty have prevented university leaders from pushing these same market logics deep into the heart of university policy and governance.

At George Mason University, we see this competition principle at multiple organizational scales, including the Department, College, and University levels. We compete with one another for enrollment, for faculty lines, and for graduate funding. At GMU, in fact, very few resources are awarded to all equally. However fantastical it seems now, it was once commonplace in American higher education for full-time faculty to receive sabbaticals on a regular, seven-year cycle (six years of work, one year of rest) (Macfarlane 2022). At GMU and many other universities, however, faculty must now compete against one another in a time-consuming application process to win one of a handful of study leave slots or professional development grants available each year. Indeed, within the neoliberal university, the only resources that are distributed without competition are high-workload, low-status positions like Associate Chair, which come with punishing workloads but *without* significant power or salary increases, or even a meaningful bump in professional prestige. Indeed, such service positions can preclude advancement in the faculty hierarchy.

Of most consequence, however, is the competition for job security in the form of a tenure-line, full-time faculty position. To be sure, tenure-line positions at all colleges and universities have been competitive since the AAUP first formalized the concept in 1915. Yet, for much of the 20th century, tenure-line positions were the norm, not the exception. For example, in 1975, 56% of all college and

university faculty positions–including two-year, four-year, and doctorate-granting institutions–were occupied by tenured or tenure-track professors (Curtis 2014). Not surprisingly, tenure density was even higher at comprehensive, research, or doctorate-granting universities. For example, even as late as 2004, tenure density in the California State University system–a public university system whose mission is squarely focused on teaching–was at 66% (Stein 2023). Yet for all institutions, teaching- or research-focused alike, tenure density has declined precipitously since the higher watermark of the early 1970s. By 2011, across all of American higher education, only 29% of faculty positions were held by tenured or tenure-track faculty. Indeed, the AAUP estimates that over 90% of the growth in faculty positions between 1975 and 2011 was in contingent, non-tenured positions (Curtis 2014).

Access to tenure has thus, in the last 40 years, become a precious and rare resource and one subject to brutal competition. This competition, of course, begins long before most competitors are even aware they are in the game. After all, an academic's life, let alone the life of a tenured full professor, is not equally accessible to everyone (Kennelly, Misra, and Karides 1999; Stricker 2011; Navarro 2017; Ellsworth et al. 2022). The accumulated advantages accrued by being born in a particular family, of a particular race or national origin, with a particular gender and sexual identity, in a specific zip code, with access to good jobs, good schools, enviable incomes, and endless enrichment opportunities have all combined to create an American academy thickly populated with academics from dominant social groups (Hamer and Lang 2015; Mignacca 2019; Museus, Ledesma, and Parker 2015).

From these family advantages, the competition then moves to SAT scores, college and graduate admissions, graduate funding, and being mentored by the "right people" at the "best," most exclusive universities. Regardless of whether you are teaching or research-focused, all of these social and economic advantages make securing a full-time or tenure-line position much more likely (Colby and Fowler 2020; Pifer et al. 2023),

It is here, then, at the precipice of the academic job market, where the system truly pits all against all in the battle for tenure and job security. Tenure has historically been available to all faculty, both research-focused and teaching-focused faculty alike, and our profession should treat those who view themselves primarily as teachers with as much respect as those who develop a passion for conducting research (Ludlum 1950; Reichman 2021). Yet the slow withdrawal of tenured positions has hit teaching-focused faculty hardest of all, particularly in so-called "research universities" and public comprehensives. In these institutions, tenure is now reserved almost entirely for research-focused faculty, thus presenting teaching-focused faculty with a choice between competing madly for the small number of tenured positions typically available at teaching-focused liberal arts colleges, shifting to community colleges (a sector experiencing its own hemorrhage of tenure-line positions), or applying for a non-tenure-track job at a research university or public comprehensive.

Regardless of the pathway, those who win in these competitions at institutions large and small get access to the shrinking number of tenure-line jobs, along with the material rewards of job security, lower teaching loads, and better pay. Those who are denied access to tenure-line jobs are thrust into a competition for the growing percentage of untenured but still full-time teaching positions available at public comprehensive or larger research universities. To be sure, these contingent positions most often come with benefits, and for many, they also fit more comfortably with their intellectual identities as inspiring and dedicated teachers. Yet, despite these benefits, these positions also demand that faculty take on punishing teaching loads and even service obligations that, for many, can slowly corrode their passion for teaching and mentoring students (Sabagh, Hall, and Sayoran 2018; Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh 2015; Siyum 2022).

Finally, those who find themselves still standing after this brutal game of musical chairs for full-time positions (tenured or untenured alike) often either leave academic life entirely or somehow patch together a living as a hyper-exploited adjunct (Anthony et al. 2020; Andro 2021). Of course, the dirty secret in academic circles is that *everyone* knows (or has mentored) a brilliant thinker and teacher who never landed that elusive tenure-line or full-time position despite years of trying. Most likely, we know more than one. We may pretend this competition rewards the very best of us, especially if we ourselves have managed to win this high-stakes lottery, but in our hearts, most of us know that meritocracy in

higher education is a lie (Purcell 2007).

The consequences of this neoliberal, all against all competition for resources, reverberate across campus. From the full-time contingent faculty perspective, we have heard from so many who have shared what it feels like to have been dispossessed of something tenured faculty enjoy: job security. Although our chapter depends on dedicated contingent faculty, even our most courageous untenured colleagues have told us they always calibrate their levels of exposure and risk. Will my chair get upset if I speak up in a meeting? Will the Dean note my presence at a GMU-AAUP rally or my signature on a faculty petition? As chapter leaders, we have been told numerous times by non-tenure track faculty that "I love what you do, but I'd prefer to stay in the background," and the reasons they give almost always boil down to one thing: fear of losing their jobs.

Not surprisingly, we have heard this same fear in our conversations with tenure-track Assistant Professors, and for many of the same reasons. On the tenure track, the mantras we've heard are "keep your head down," and "don't antagonize senior faculty." Who can blame them? With their privileged status and their family's future hanging in the balance, the logic of the neoliberal university pushes early career faculty into a bind: either direct every ounce of time and energy into research productivity or risk losing your career. For this reason, in our experience, Assistant Professors are another common source of GMU-AAUP support and praise from deep in the background.

What about tenured faculty? Although tenured faculty do enjoy enhanced job security, even these relatively privileged workers are not spared from either the competitive pressures of the neoliberal university or from feelings of insecurity and fear.

Put simply, tenure does not make you bulletproof. The threat of post-tenure review lies quietly in the background, even if it has been used relatively sparingly at GMU in recent history. Moreover, most, if not all, members of the tenured faculty have built their careers during an era when neoliberal models of university governance have been ascendant (Fleming 2021; McKeown 2022). From their first days in graduate school, in short, tenure-line faculty have been socialized into thinking about their work through the lens of the ideal entrepreneurial faculty subject, where they are called relentlessly to *produce*, to be *productive*, to accumulate individual achievements and lengthy CVs, to progress from assistant to associate to full–and to do so quickly, lest we be seen as a late bloomer or, condescendingly, a "good worker bee" (Putnam 2009; Schwartz 2016; Nititham 2022).[3] Such hits to our professional reputations sting deeply, yes, but more to the point, they undermine our power and ability to exert control over our working conditions. In the academy, research is the coin of the realm. It is a powerful source of symbolic capital (Barnett 2003; Lucas 2004).

In other words, regardless of contract status, rank, or position, the incentives of faculty life in the neoliberal university all push toward an ethos of individual achievement and away from collective action. When you combine these symbolic incentives and pressures (status, prestige, fear) with the material concerns of precarity, overwork, and burnout (discussed in more detail below), virtually everything in faculty life is stacked against the decision to get involved. Given this hostile institutional context, we feel fortunate and grateful for the amount of buy-in we have, in fact, received from our tenured, term, and part-time colleagues.

Engine of Disconnection II: The Dull Compulsion of Overwork

If the penetration of market logics into university governance has yielded a faculty divided by imperatives of competition and fear, the economics of contemporary American higher education also works against faculty solidarity in a much more direct way. It simply buries us all under punishing and ever-increasing workloads. As faculty activists, the most common reason we hear from our colleagues for not getting involved is "I'm just too busy." There really is no satisfying response to this, because it's true. They *are* too busy to advocate and agitate for better working conditions. They are stretched too thin at work. They are on their own at home. They are indeed stuck on the late capitalist hamster wheel. To be sure, we can say–and we do–that the only way to get off the wheel is to organize with others

3 Direct quote from a former chair who described [the co-author] to a former Dean in this way.

and that, someday, the time they sink into organizing will pay off in a more humane workplace. But this doesn't help them now. They are already at 100 percent and have nothing left to give.

It took a long time to get to this unhappy place, and a lot of intertwining political decisions and policies worked to get us here. These policies include the disastrous decision, beginning in the 1980s, to reconceptualize a university education as "human capital," the benefit of which accrues not to the society but to the individual student (Kezar 2004; Saunders 2007; Fleming 2021). This reconceptualization served as the justification for steadily reducing state support for higher education while shifting the burden onto students and their families (Cottom 2017; Newfield 2018). Not only did this lead to the explosion of student debt during the next 40 years, disproportionately impacting students of color, first-generation students, and students from low-income families (Newfield 2018), but the slow starvation of public universities aided in the installation of the neoliberal modes of governance discussed above (Cloud 2018). The modern public university would be run like a business, with the constant pressure of shrinking state support helpfully forcing administrators and faculty alike to "do more with less," a nice euphemism for the wrenching move to a majority-contingent faculty workforce toiling under increasing teaching loads, escalating research expectations, and increasing class sizes (Washburn 2006; Navarro 2017; Andro 2021; Marcus 2021).

To this history of neoliberalization we might also add the intertwined histories of racial and gendered exclusion in the American academy. Black and Indigenous scholars, along with other minoritized scholars, were almost universally excluded from faculty positions at American universities until the development of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the mid-1800s (Kennelly, Misra, and Karides 1999). Today, even as the civil rights movements of the 20th century forced open the doors of predominantly white institutions, at least as a matter of law, these exclusions persist in practice if not policy. In 2017, less than one percent of postsecondary faculty identified as Indigenous (American Indian or Alaska Native), only six percent identified as Black, and, in total, only 24% could be identified as "non-white" (Davis and Fry 2019). White women have had more success in breaking down the ivory gates at American universities, reaching near parity with men across the American faculty as a whole. In fact, most professors and students in higher education are women. Yet scholars who identify as women are far more likely than men to find themselves pushed toward non-tenure track and contingent positions. Overall, according to Colby and Fowler (2020), women only occupy 43% of tenure-track positions, and only 33% of full professors identify as women.

However sobering, these numbers fail to convey the struggles faced by women, scholars of color, and racialized women most of all (Cottom 2019). For their part, Kennelly, Misra, and Karides (1999) document the loneliness and isolation minoritized scholars have endured, especially considering that they are often the only faculty of their particular mix of racial, gender, and sexual identity within the Department or even the university as a whole. Almost everyone who identifies as a woman or scholar of color can tell multiple stories of social exclusion, unequal pay or recognition, harassment, or discrimination at their universities, and even these stories cannot capture the corrosive grind of microaggressions that sap the spirit and serve as near-daily reminders of continuing exclusion and marginalization (Hamer and Lang 2015). The ongoing hostility of predominantly white institutions to scholars of color and the stubborn persistence of implicit (and explicit) sexism in the academy present daunting barriers to faculty organizing and the goal of building intersectional trust and solidarity across lines of race, class, sexuality, and gender.

So in the United States, now over four centuries deep into our intertwined histories of white supremacy and misogyny, and more than four decades down the neoliberal road of austerity, privatization, and precaritization, where do we stand? As faculty organizers, we can confidently state that we are not in a good place. In fact, from our vantage point at George Mason University, faculty morale is at an all-time low.

Let's start with our most exploited faculty colleagues. At GMU, adjunct professors are capped at six courses per year (excluding summers), a figure which purposefully puts them just below the threshold for receiving employer-provided health insurance under the Affordable Care Act. The absolute most they can earn at GMU teaching these three classes a semester–a full-time load under

any reasonable system–is between $19,656 and $30,942 (Guilford 2024). Even at the upper limit, this income represents only 51% of what is required to meet basic expenses for a single individual in Fairfax County, Virginia (Living Wage Institute 2024).

Not surprisingly, job satisfaction is lowest among what GMU administrators call "full-time adjuncts," that is, those part-time professors whose only form of support is teaching and who would like to land a full-time faculty position with benefits (Jones and Boehm-Davis 2016). We have heard reports of adjuncts sleeping in their cars as they try to piece together a living teaching 4-5 courses a term across multiple institutions. Even if we were skilled at meeting our adjunct colleagues halfway and centering their concerns in our work–and, alas, we are not–their working conditions present daunting challenges to anyone hoping to organize adjunct faculty and link them with other instructional workers on campus.

For their part, full-time term faculty have a vital presence and deep roots in all academic units at GMU. And like adjuncts, they are exploited as well, laboring under intensive 4/4 workloads for salaries that are, by policy, set significantly below their tenure-line counterparts. In fact, the university's required minimum salaries for term faculty at each rank (assistant, associate, full) are set, in lockstep, a full $15,000 below those on the tenure track (Ginsberg 2020). Although individual colleges can raise their term faculty above these minimums to create parity across the tenure divide, the minimum salary policy is a clear statement that GMU values research (full-time tenure-line faculty) more than teaching or practice (full-time term faculty).[4]

Full-time contingent faculty who teach feedback-intensive courses–including writing courses, performance courses, journalism, and research methods–are particularly exploited. Each semester, term faculty tell us they are drowning under multiple assignments in each section as they return detailed and iterative feedback on multiple drafts to help students develop their skills. Although guidelines from national organizations mandate small course caps for feedback-intensive courses (e.g., a maximum of 15 students for writing-intensive courses), GMU routinely packs 24-40 students into such courses (Conference on College Composition and Communication 2015). Some of our writing and composition faculty on 4/4 loads are required to respond to the work of 80-120 students each term, returning feedback on multiple drafts per student.

This pace is not sustainable. It corrodes our colleagues' health and well-being. It also saps their energy and ability to engage even in basic university governance, let alone the "optional" work of organizing with GMU-AAUP. The result is that, although term faculty do most of the undergraduate teaching at GMU, they are often silent–or rendered silent–when it comes to setting policy at the department, college, and university levels. Although they have the formal right to engage in faculty governance, they often lack the time and energy to engage in either while also lacking the job security to speak their minds openly and publicly in governance debates. Although many dedicated term faculty somehow find time to engage and courageously speak their minds, in general, these working conditions exert near-constant pressure on our term faculty to keep their heads down and try to stay ahead of their intensive teaching workloads.

Finally, tenured and tenure-track faculty also find themselves buried under escalating workloads. Research expectations, especially for new Assistant Professors, have steadily escalated. Upon tenure, intensive service obligations often await, particularly for women and faculty of color who often feel subtly called, cajoled, or pressured to focus their time on advising students and serving their colleagues in such roles (Misra et al. 2011). Even those who reach the pinnacle of the faculty status hierarchy–our full professors, our research superstars, our golden ones–feel ground down by the incessant competition for grant funding and the demands of mentoring the next generation of university researchers.

None of this is good news for faculty organizers. The colleagues we are trying to organize are all exhausted from the performativity demands of the neoliberal university.

The above sketch has focused on the challenges we have faced. But that is only one side of our experience. Despite these challenges, we have also seen faculty of all ranks and positions at GMU selflessly give their time to support their colleagues, both in faculty governance and as members and

4 Internal memorandum available online at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1x2uthxGTfxdBjyrN73zQabrXl4joju3k/view?usp=sharing

leaders in GMU-AAUP. We are deeply grateful to all those who somehow defy the system and carve out precious time to engage in collective actions that may not reach their goals or pay off for years.

At the same time, the material and ideological barriers to faculty solidarity described above are quite real. The institutional culture and incentive systems of the neoliberal university–built on reductive notions of individual productivity and achievement–quietly undermine solidarity, demanding that faculty produce more with less and discouraging faculty from thinking about our interdependence with others. Even when faculty reject these symbolic and material incentives, the dull compulsion of overwork pushes relentlessly down on faculty of all ranks, smothering the impulse to join with others to improve working conditions for all. Taken together, these dynamics perform exactly as designed. They isolate and divide the faculty against one another, keep these isolated faculty focused on their individual ambitions, and thus undermine our ability to engage in the single activity powerful enough to challenge neoliberal systems of university governance: collective action.

A Better Path Forward

Throughout this paper, we have struggled to balance the agency of individual faculty with the pressures and limits exerted by structural relations of power and resources. It's not always easy to focus on the structure. When you ask faculty members for help, and they say no, it feels like an individual choice. After all, *we* are engaged in this work even though we have individual ambitions, and our work and family lives can also feel chaotic and overwhelming. Despite this, we found a way to say yes. But we also know that, as leaders, we must put these feelings aside. More to the point, as critical scholars, we are intimately familiar with the severe limits of individualistic or agency-centered analyses of social action. We are, in fact, committed materialists. We understand that, paraphrasing Marx, human beings indeed make their own choices, but never under conditions of their own choosing.

To untangle these questions of agency and structure in promoting or undermining collective action at the university, we turn to Iris Marion Young's (2011) political and feminist theorizing on how structural oppression and unequal power relations operate to reproduce and maintain inequitable systems. In Young's framework, oppression is certainly the product of tyrannical power, where a ruling group, such as in South Africa during Apartheid or in the US during slavery or Jim Crow, deploys myriad, often punishing and dehumanizing, strategies to maintain power and control over its subjects. But critically, Young also recognizes that oppressive forces operate in the everyday, where well-intentioned people working within systems enact and enforce practices that likewise reproduce structural marginalization and exclusion. In this way, oppression also refers to the systematic constraints on groups that are "embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules" (Young 2011: 41). Thus, she argues that institutionalized power is mediated by many actors or "third agents" who, for a complex host of reasons, including unconscious processes, "support and execute the will of the powerful" (Young 2011: 31). In her writings, Young describes how institutionalized power is exercised by, for example, a judge over incarcerated people via a network of agents, including prison wardens, administrators, guards, lawyers, and parole officers, who are each tasked with operationalizing and carrying out the laws, policies, rules, and regulations of the criminal legal system.

To fully understand how structural oppression operates, we must understand how individuals, as agents of the powerful, knowingly or unknowingly reproduce the background conditions necessary to perpetuate marginalization (Young 2011). In this sense, individuals are not to blame for structural inequities, and accounts that focus on individual agents most often miss the mark. Indeed, Young claims that individual attribution or blame would not help remedy structural injustice because structural injustice is not an isolated instance of wrongdoing. For Young, structural oppression is the product of multiple actions and processes occurring over time that are enacted and enforced by diverse agents or everyday workers who are following "the rules" and acting within accepted institutional norms. In other words, structural oppression is the "unintended, cumulative result of everyday, accepted behavior" (Young 2011: 52).

We believe that similar dynamics are at work within the neoliberal university. Inequities are baked into the institution at a structural level, and the actions of well-intentioned administrators and faculty enact and enforce, reproduce, and maintain structurally oppressive outcomes. Focusing on the actions or inactions of individual faculty, blaming individual faculty members for their decisions to "go along to get along" rather than engaging in collective action for structural change, is to miss the mark. We are all simply trying to survive and succeed within the context we've been given, with the resources at our disposal. The system presents rewards, however meager, for relentless and exhausting productivity. It offers nothing in return for collective action.

The political question before us is clear. What are the principles and practices that promise to break through the structural barriers discussed above and encourage a renewed commitment among faculty to collective action for change at the neoliberal university? We can only begin to sketch an answer here, but in this final section, we offer three principles that we believe can productively guide efforts to build solidarity on campus.

Principle 1 - Organizing versus advocacy

The first principle speaks to the purpose of faculty advocacy organizations like GMU-AAUP. Right away, the language we often use to describe our work–advocacy–subtly leads us in the wrong direction. As we have written with other AAUP activists, the term "advocacy" connotes a specific philosophy of social change and posits a particular relationship between an organization's leaders and members (Fields et al. 2022). Briefly, framing activism as "advocacy" suggests that leaders with expertise *represent* their members in the halls of power and attempt to drive movements of social change from the top down. For this reason, as a form of activism, advocacy has a certain flavor. Advocates send letters to administrators demanding investigations and meetings. They pass tightly crafted resolutions in the Faculty Senate. They ask tough questions in public meetings. And what about members? In an advocacy model, members take on a largely transactional role. They pay the dues that support the chapter. They ask for help when their rights are violated. When a crisis hits, they might be willing to sign the occasional petition or attend a rally. However, their main role as members is to provide passive support for chapter leaders who pressure decision-makers on their behalf.

This is no way to build faculty consciousness about structural oppression or build faculty power to leverage systemic change. The advocacy model is hierarchical, and it is easily co-opted by administrators. Indeed, we can think of many well-intentioned colleagues who have taken the oft-trod path from faculty advocacy to administrative ambition. But most of all, the advocacy model, in true neoliberal form, cultivates an ethos of passivity and customer service among members. It is also very seductive. We have learned how easy it can be as leaders to slip into a "watch-dogging" posture, where our work becomes focused on problem-solving for individual faculty (like an ad hoc grievance committee) and hitting administrators with social media broadsides. All of this is time-consuming, to be sure, but in truth, it's much simpler and easier than doing the daily, difficult work of raising consciousness about the harms of neoliberalism and our respective roles in its perpetuation and building one-on-one connections with faculty across lines of status, rank, and discipline. Yet, ultimately, advocacy is self-defeating, leading inevitably to burnout and bitterness. This is a familiar trap we have fallen into multiple times.

Instead, we have tried to put *organizing*, not advocacy, at the center of our work. As Fields and her co-authors argue, organizing begins with the premise that lasting, structural change occurs when large numbers of individuals refuse to "go along to get along" and come together to press demands on decision-makers. The power our chapter wields is collective power. It is the power that accumulates when large numbers of faculty are actively engaged in the daily life of the chapter. The more active our members are, the more collective power we wield to press for systemic change (Fields et al. 2022). In this way, chapter leaders are not the source of power. They are merely those who volunteer their labor temporarily to coordinate wide participation in the process of building connections, expanding faculty

buy-in, setting goals, and planning campaigns. Good leaders may magnify and focus power, but the source of power lies with our members and supporters who understand how structural oppression and unequal power relations operate and are deeply motivated to fight in solidarity for our collective, interlinked liberation.

Building collective power in this way is not glamorous. It means pushing out of one's comfort zone, reaching out to colleagues, going to coffees and lunches, and talking with faculty about their experiences and their hopes for the future. It is the kind of relational, trust-building work that garners little currency within the neoliberal university. It means asking people to trust and do things together for the common good, to join as members, to pay dues, to move from doing nothing to doing something, and then to do a little more each year. None of this is easy. We fail at it all the time, yielding to the demands of our day jobs. But we also know that this work is the only way to build the kind of collective power necessary to force structural, systemic change to liberate our university from the grips of oppressive neoliberalism.

Principle 2 - Center the margins

We have argued that the barriers organizers face in this task of building connections and collective power are formidable. The twin engines of disconnection–neoliberal competition and the dull compulsion of overwork–not only squeeze every last drop of productivity from faculty labor, but they also act to constrain individual agency. These engines exert friction against the decision to get involved.

No one is immune from this friction, but clearly, some faculty–chiefly tenured faculty–have more agency than others. Yet our university's entrepreneurial organizational culture pressures tenured faculty to devote their enhanced agency toward the goal of increasing productivity, but their enhanced job security and autonomy also means they have more room to maneuver, to resist.

Call it the Spider-man principle. With enhanced agency comes great responsibility. As tenured faculty, we believe we have a moral responsibility to help advance the interests of colleagues who face more risks and earn fewer rewards and to help those who are the most vulnerable and carry the heaviest burdens in an oppressive, gendered, racialized, and classed structure. Following feminist praxis, in short, we believe our work should center the margins (hooks 2000).

But this is not merely a moral commitment. It is a pragmatic and strategic choice as well. Tenured faculty could devote their autonomy toward advancing their specific class interests–more research leave, more support for grant writing, and more funding for research assistants. However, this would only widen the gap between contingent and tenure-line faculty and undermine the collective power necessary for true systemic change. Instead, we believe tenured faculty should devote their enhanced resources to initiatives that increase the autonomy of faculty across all ranks, with a specific focus on contingent faculty and graduate students.

Universalizing tenure, for example, does not directly benefit tenured faculty. However, it would greatly empower full-time contingent faculty, reducing the barrier of fear and freeing them to engage more vigorously and openly for systemic changes–including reduced workloads and increased pay–that benefit all faculty (and students as well). The same logic applies to initiatives that enhance the agency and autonomy of graduate students. Faculty support for graduate employee unionization not only improves our students' quality of life, but their increased security would free graduate students to join more openly in cross-campus activism. The recent and dramatic victory of a coalition of tenure-line professors, contingent faculty, and graduate student workers at Rutgers University–where all three instructional unions struck at once and won historic concessions from university administrators–offers a powerful example of the strategic value of centering the margins (Bowman 2023).

Ultimately, as Erik Olin Wright (2019) argued in his last book, the goal of organizing should not simply be to win concessions from authorities while the more fundamental "rules of the game" go unchallenged and unchanged. Rather, *the goal is to change the game itself*–that is, to win resources and establish policies that decisively alter the field of struggle in ways that advantage faculty and

students. The quickest and most powerful way to change the game itself is to struggle alongside the colleagues whose agency is currently most constrained and win them access to the resources they need to join the fight. To not engage in this way is to wittingly or unwittingly serve as the agents of the powerful in the reproduction of structural oppression.

Principle 3 - Embrace reflexive solidarity

Like most other political concepts, solidarity is in danger of devolving entirely into buzzword or hashtag status. We cannot let this happen. Solidarity, in fact, is a concept that must be rescued, nurtured, and rehabilitated not merely in discourse but in practice. Solidarity, in short, is not just something you *feel*. It is something you *do*. Organizing in this way is the labor of solidarity. *It is solidarity work*.

For their part, Kneuer et al. (2022) argue that solidarity can be best conceptualized as a particular kind of social relationship that occurs when (a) at least two actors (b) share in a goal of overcoming adversity, and, crucially, (c) are prepared to incur high costs in the process of achieving the goal. It is this last element–a willingness to incur individual costs for collective goals–that separates solidarity from compassion or other forms of tacit or symbolic support. Beyond mere well wishes, solidarity means that both parties have skin in the game. Both parties are taking risks, even if the risks are rarely distributed equally among the parties involved.

Solidarity operates as a powerful orienting ideal with deep roots in the experience of the social movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. Yet the history of these movements has also repeatedly shown solidarity work itself is subject to internal divisions and unequal relations of power. In short, power relations *within* social movements have often defined solidarity in ways that advantage the perspectives and goals of group leaders at the expense of marginalized movement actors (Collins 2017).

In fact, the second wave of Black feminist scholarship and praxis famously focused on precisely this intersection between solidarity and power in social justice struggles (Carastathis 2016; Collins and Bilge 2020; Crenshaw 2019). Even as they struggled for gender equality for all women, Black feminists faced demands from white leaders to subordinate their concerns about race and class within the feminist movement in the interest of presenting a united front against their “common” experience of misogyny. At the very same time, the male leaders in Black liberation movements pressed similar demands on Black women to ignore concerns over sexism within the struggle for racial justice and civil rights.

For this reason, Patricia Hill Collins’ (2017, 2019) work on intersectionality argues for a model of revolutionary praxis based on what she calls *flexible solidarity*. For Collins, flexible solidarity is a conditional, adaptable, and pragmatic form of solidarity that is especially suited to the needs of marginalized groups within larger movements for social justice. She describes how Black feminists in the 20th century would strategically tack back and forth between moments of united-front solidarity with male leaders, particularly when engaged with the White power structure, and moments where they would press demands for the dismantling of patriarchy and sexism within Black liberation movements themselves. As Collins (2017: 32) concludes,

> *Black women saw the need for solidarity yet calibrated their ideas and actions to hone critical understandings of solidarity that were better suited for political projects. Solidarity was not an essentialist category, a bundle of rules that was blindly applied across time and space. Instead, a flexible understanding of solidarity enabled Black women to work with the concept, molding it to the challenges at hand.*

At GMU and elsewhere, a similar ethic of flexible solidarity would recognize that, particularly for faculty who are in more precarious positions within the university, solidarity must be flexible and conditional. Faculty members who have accumulated power and resources, including those based on race, gender,

and sexuality, must *earn* the solidarity of their comrades and not expect that it be freely given as a matter of course.

Finally, to Collins' concept of flexible solidarity, we would add one other dimension: reflexivity. In social science, reflexivity refers to a process of self-monitoring when one's own practices come into view for observation and reflection (Giddens 1991). This concept plays a particularly important role in qualitative forms of social inquiry, where researchers commit to applying systematic methods of observation and analysis to their own research assumptions, premises, and practices (Day 2012). In short, reflexivity in research contexts means that the tools of critical inquiry–questioning, testing, interpretation, criticism, and judgment–must be applied not only to participants but to the researcher as well. The hope, of course, is that this process of reflexivity will work to counter the powerful pull of implicit biases and the perils of selective observation and interpretation.

In a similar way, we argue that all participants in faculty organizing should engage in reflexive solidarity–that is, an ongoing self-evaluation and re-examination of their collective policies, commitments, and actions. To what extent are we living up to our values? Do our current practices of building solidarity recognize both internal and external imbalances and inequalities of power and influence? What is the current distribution of risks and resources within our collective, and should these risks and rewards be refigured or redistributed in some way? These are the questions both leaders and members must continually ask themselves and one another as they attempt to strengthen their commitment to act *with and on behalf of one another*.

Reflexive solidarity work is, in this way, open-ended. It is a conversation where we question, negotiate, and rework our commitments to one another. In this conversation, nothing is guaranteed, and failure is always possible. As Jodi Dean (1995: 114) argued:

> *once solidarity is conceived reflectively, we can no longer establish once and for all the content of the expectations of solidarity groups. How we understand ourselves as a 'we,' the expectations we have of ourselves and others, changes over time, varying with respect to our needs, circumstances, and understandings of what is necessary to secure the integrity of our relationships.*

In conclusion, Dean (1995) writes that it is by having this open-ended conversation that we define, as a collective connected *across* and *through* our differences, what it means to stand with and take responsibility for one another–without reducing the other's interests to our own. And it is our hope that by pursuing a strategy of bottom-up organizing, where the margins are centered and where solidarity is not demanded but rather negotiated and offered freely (but flexibly and provisionally), we can both imagine and construct a more open, joyful, post-neoliberal university.

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