Graduate Student Employee Unionization: Considerations for the Future of Graduate
Education in Psychology

Ian Gutierrez^{1,2}, Philippe Bou-Malham³, & Dana Miller-Cotto⁴

¹ University of Connecticut

² Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center, Cleveland, Ohio

³ University of Oregon

⁴ Temple University

Author Note

Ian A. Gutierrez, Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Connecticut, and
Psychology Service, Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center, Cleveland, Ohio; Philippe
Bou-Malham, Department of Psychology, University of Oregon; and Dana Miller-Cotto,
Department of Psychological Studies in Education, Temple University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ian Gutierrez, 942
Montford Road, Cleveland Heights, OH 44121. E-mail: ian.gutierrez@uconn.edu

Abstract

The graduate student employee (GSE) labor movement in the United States has grown rapidly in the past decade. GSEs have found cause to devote their time and energy towards organizing graduate students to support GSE unionization. The organization of GSE labor represents a historic shift in the relationship between trainees in the academy, the professoriate, and the university system. As social scientists, educators, and health professionals, psychologists can play a substantial role in shaping discourse on the labor movement in graduate education. To date, however, the field of psychology has remained mute with respect to organized GSE labor. We review recent developments in the debate concerning GSE labor organization and assess the impact of organized GSE labor on teaching, research, and clinical training. We contend that ongoing efforts to organize graduate student labor will have a significant impact on the future of psychological education that demands the voice and attention of the field. Finally, we conclude with a call to the action for psychologists in the training community and an invitation for further discussion on GSE unionization within the profession.

Keywords: graduate student; graduate education; graduate training; labor union; social justice

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By definition, all aspiring professional psychologists go to graduate school. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines a “professional psychologist” as an individual who “...has a doctoral degree in psychology from an organized, sequential program in a regionally accredited university or professional school” (American Psychological Association, 1987, p.713). Many psychologists fondly recall their graduate school years as a time when they first taught a class, saw a client, or published a peer-reviewed paper. Most readers will likely not recall organizing a labor union, negotiating a collective bargaining agreement, or advocating for workplace rights as graduate students. For us, however, our voluntary work for organized graduate student employee¹ (GSE) labor forms an indelible part of our graduate school experience. We are not alone: GSEs nationwide are lobbying policymakers to recognize GSE unions, negotiating collective bargaining agreements, and making their grievances known through collective action (Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions [CGEU], 2017; Lafer, 2003). Despite these developments, professional psychology has yet to engage in a substantive discussion regarding the impact of GSE unionization on graduate education, the relationship of psychology to the organized GSE labor movement, and the implications of organized GSE labor for the future of the discipline and the profession.

Our aim is to open a fruitful dialogue concerning the relationship between professional psychology and the GSE labor movement. GSE unionization is controversial, and we wish to make transparent that our personal experiences as graduate students and GSE unionization advocates² inform our shared perspective in favor of GSE unionization. As emerging scholars, we believe that a productive discourse should welcome opposing viewpoints. Any such discourse, however, must first begin with the relevant background and legal facts surrounding GSE unionization. Towards this end, we begin with a brief review of the institutional and legal history of the GSE labor movement. We then discuss the ways in

which GSE unionization impacts graduate education across disciplines, followed by a review of the unique considerations GSE unionization has regarding training and education in psychology. Using a developmental framework, we draw attention to the role that implicit biases against students (i.e., “studentism”) has played in conjunction with social and institutional factors to intensify GSE organizing efforts. Finally, we conclude with a call to action for further discussion to address the needs of graduate students and the profession.

Historical and Legal Precedence for GSE Unionization in the United States

The legal standing of GSEs under the National Labor Relations Act has been the subject of debate since the first GSE union in the United States was recognized in 1969 (Rhoades & Rhoads, 2003). In a series of cases throughout the 1970s, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) established the precedent for the “primarily educational” test, which held that GSEs’ claim to collective bargaining rights was best determined by evaluating whether their relationship to their respective institution was “primarily educational” or “primarily economic” (see discussion on “academic exceptionalism” in Lafer, 2003). In cases where GSEs were denied collective bargaining rights, the NLRB deemed their relationship to their institutions to be “primarily educational”—that is, characterized by a teacher-student relationship rather than an employer-employee relationship (Lafer, 2003; Rhoades & Rhoads, 2003; for a detailed historical review, see Singh, Zinni, & MacLellan, 2006).

By 1990, fewer than ten GSE unions had been recognized (Singh, Zinni, & MacLellan, 2006). As universities increasingly relied on inexpensive GSE labor and graduate students became increasingly affected by rising student debt, GSE unionization gained momentum (Rhoades & Rhoads, 2003). By 2001, 27 GSE unions had won recognition (Lafer, 2003). The growth of GSE unionization has primarily occurred within the public sector, where universities have either voluntarily recognized GSE unions, or unions prevailed on state legislatures to win collective bargaining rights (Lafer, 2003; Singh, Zinni, & MacLellan,

2006). This changed with the NLRB’s landmark decision in New York University (2000), which overturned its own precedent and rejected the “primarily educational” test, citing the changing economic structure of higher education and the critical role of GSEs in carrying out the functions of the university. Just four years later, however, the NLRB reinstated its previous position of deeming the GSE’s relationship to the university as being “primarily educational” (Brown University, 2004).

Despite the setback to organizing efforts posed by the Brown University (2004) decision, organizing efforts have progressed apace. As of 2017, more than 30 GSE unions have won recognition, and 20 more universities have active GSE unionization campaigns underway (CGEU, 2017). In 2013, New York University voluntarily re-recognized its GSE union, the Graduate Student Organizing Committee–United Auto Workers Local 2110 (GSOC-UAW), after eight years of continued organizing and pressure. GSOC-UAW is currently the only recognized GSE union at a private university in the United States.³

However, GSEs at New York University will likely not hold this exclusive status among private universities for long. In 2016, following successive appeals by GSEs at Columbia University, the NLRB once again reversed itself, voting to overturn Brown University (2004) and restore the right collective bargaining rights to GSEs at private universities. As of this writing, active GSE organizing campaigns are underway at Columbia University, Duke University, Harvard University, the New School for Social Research, Northwestern University, Princeton University, the University of Chicago, and Yale University, to name a few. In most cases, these efforts have been met with significant resistance. Notably, GSEs at Yale University, following a successful union election, staged a hunger strike that received significant press coverage following Yale’s unwillingness to recognize the result of the vote and subsequent refusal to engage in collective bargaining negotiations with Yale’s GSEs (Anderson, 2017; Klein, 2017). These events suggest that GSEs’ efforts to unionize will continue to be contested by many universities, and the right of GSEs to collectively bargain will remain contentious for the foreseeable future.

Graduate Students or Graduate Employees?

The “primarily educational” position views graduate students as trainees whose labor serves exclusively to enhance the student’s academic knowledge or professional skills, and denies graduate students employee rights on the basis of their status as trainees (Lafer, 2003; Rhoades & Rhoads, 2003). Yet, as exemplified by the New York University (2000) decision, this perspective has come under increased scrutiny. In that decision, the NLRB argued that,

“The uncontradicted and salient facts establish that graduate assistants perform services under the control and direction of the employer, and they are compensated for these services by the employer. Graduate assistants work as teachers and researchers. They perform their duties for, and under the control of, the employer’s departments and programs. Graduate assistants are paid for their work and are carried on the employer’s payroll system. The graduate assistants’ relationship with the employer is thus indistinguishable from the traditional master-servant relationship” (New York University, 2000, p. 1026)

The New York University (2000) decision recognized that GSEs have an economic relationship with their hiring institutions on account of being financially compensated for their work. Opponents of GSE unionization counter that graduate students are not compensated for work, but teach and conduct research as part of their education and receive financial assistance to support them during their time in graduate school (Brown University, 2004). As previously noted, the Brown University (2004) decision further argues that a graduate student’s educational relationship with the university supersedes any claim to employee status (Lafer, 2003).

The Brown University (2004) decision suggests that graduate student remuneration somehow exists independently of services rendered by these students. However, GSEs’ incomes depend upon satisfactory execution of their responsibilities, and failure to perform these duties results in a cessation of payment or a refusal to renew appointments. Moreover,

“academic exceptionalism” (Lafer, 2003) ignores the fact that there is nothing exceptional about GSE labor in the eyes of federal tax code: GSE income is taxable, and a student must be eligible for employment under Federal immigration laws in order to be hired as a GSE. A GSE’s income, unlike a graduate student who receives a “service-free” fellowship, is contingent on work performed within the parameters of an employer-employee relationship.

The contention that GSEs are students first and employees second presents graduate students’ educational and economic relationships with their universities as mutually exclusive. To be considered an employee, the NLRB requires that individuals must have some form of an economic relationship with their employer, but does not require the relationship be primarily or solely economic (see dissenting opinion, *Brown University*, 2004). We do not argue that graduate students are not trainees; rather, we view this point as irrelevant to the critical issue at hand—that graduate students who are paid to provide services through assistantships are employees and are therefore entitled to the labor rights that come with employment status.

With the restoration of GSE collective bargaining rights granted by the *Columbia University* (2016) decision, the NLRB majority opinion explicitly rejected the “primarily educational” standard that undergirded the *Brown University* (2004) and argued, as we have done, that student and employee statuses are not mutually exclusive, and that the consideration of an employee’s educational relationship with an institution lies outside the purview of the NLRB’s jurisdiction.

“The *Brown University* Board held that graduate assistants *cannot* be statutory employees because they ‘are primarily students and have a primarily educational, not economic, relationship with their university.’ We disagree. The Board has the statutory authority to treat student assistants as statutory employees, where they perform work, at the direction of the university, for which they are compensated. Statutory coverage is permitted by virtue of an employment relationship; it is not foreclosed by the existence of some other, additional relationship that the Act

170 does not reach” (Columbia University, 2016, p.1, emphasis original)

171 If history is any guide, the NLRB’s determinations regarding GSE collective bargaining
172 rights are fickle at best, and clearly vulnerable to shifting political winds. It comes as little
173 surprise that the New York University (2000) and Columbia University (2016) decisions that
174 permitted GSE unionization at private universities were decided by Boards whose members
175 were appointed by the left-leaning Clinton and Obama administrations, whereas the Brown
176 University (2004) decision revoking these rights was decided by the right-leaning NLRB
177 appointed by the Bush administration. In light of significant resistance from influential ivy
178 league institutions and the political uncertainties arising from the Trump administration, much
179 remains to be seen concerning the organizing rights of GSEs. Nevertheless, we are cautiously
180 optimistic that the expansion of GSE union rights under the Columbia University (2016)
181 decision will normalize GSE organizing and shift the culture of higher education towards
182 greater acceptance of GSE unionization.

183 **Impact of GSE Unionization on Graduate Education**

184 The impacts of GSE unionization affect graduate education both within psychology
185 departments and beyond them. We first consider the impact of GSE unionization on
186 graduate education across disciplines, drawing particular focus to three issues of controversy
187 surrounding GSE unionization: student-advisor relationships, academic freedom, and the
188 effects of collective action taken by unions. We then address a few of the most salient issues
189 that spur GSE unionization efforts: financial support, rights and benefits for student parents,
190 and healthcare. Lastly, we address the administrative costs associated with GSE
191 unionization.

192 **Student-Advisor Relationships**

193 Critics argue that granting GSEs collective bargaining rights impairs advisors’ ability
194 to adequately mentor their students by purportedly restricting communication between

students and advisors (e.g., Brown University, 2004). Given that effective mentoring significantly contributes to the self-efficacy and productivity of graduate students (Hollingsworth & Fassinger, 2002), impairment of the student-advisor relationship would undermine the goals of graduate education. However, qualitative interviews with both faculty members and academic administrators at public universities found that GSE collective bargaining compromised neither student-faculty relationships nor the free exchange of ideas (Hewitt, 2000; Julius & Gumport, 2003).

A more recent quantitative study conducted by Rogers, Eaton, & Voos (2013) explored this question in greater depth by surveying graduate students attending eight public universities, four of which had GSE unions and four of which did not (the non-unionized universities had no active union organizing campaigns during data collection). All universities held a very high research activity (i.e., “R1”) Carnegie classification and were matched for geographic location, student enrollment, and research budget. The authors asked 516 graduate students about their relationship with their mentors, academic freedom in the university, and economic issues. After controlling for program type (e.g., psychology, history) and geographical region (e.g., Northeast, Midwest), the authors found that unionized GSEs perceived that their primary advisor provided them with greater social support (e.g., accepts them as a competent professional) and professional support (e.g., advisor uses their position to support the student’s development), that there was higher pay adequacy and fairness, and that there was greater perceived academic freedom (Rogers, Eaton, & Voos, 2013). These findings suggest that GSE unionization has no adverse effect on student-advisor relationships. Rather, collective bargaining may help to produce an environment in which advisors can provide support for their students that is unencumbered by employment concerns. However, it is important to note that research in this area is limited. Future research might explore the impact that GSE unionization has on student-advisor relationships specifically within psychology departments.

Academic Freedom

Administrators fear that GSE unions will attempt to curtail academic freedom, a concern made evident in the Brown University (2004) decision. The American Association of University Professors defines academic freedom as the “full freedom in research and in the publication of results, freedom in the classroom in discussing the subject, and the right of faculty to be free from institutional censorship or discipline when they speak or write as citizens” (AAUP, 2007). Academic freedom undergirds scientific progress, and extending this freedom to graduate students permits them to develop as emerging scholars without concern for censure.

Research suggests that this fear is unfounded. GSE unions have neither attempted to bargain over issues related to academic freedom nor restrict the free exchange of ideas between students and their advisors (Lafer, 2003; Rogers, Eaton, & Voos, 2013). Many GSE collective bargaining agreements enshrine academic freedom as a shared value between the union and the university and explicitly prohibit GSE unions from infringing on the university’s right to adjudicate over academic freedom. Moreover, GSE labor infringement on academic freedom would be self-injurious, as GSEs aspire to enjoy the fruits of academic freedom. In fact, GSE unions share faculty union commitment to academic freedom, which catalyzed the organization of faculty labor in the early 20th century (AAUP, 2007; Scott, 2009).

Collective Action

With the recognition of GSE unions comes the potential for labor strikes or other collective actions that might disrupt academic affairs. This is particularly true at private universities, where GSE unions are not constrained by “no-strike” laws that often prevent public service employees in the United States from striking. Research on the effect of academic strikes on undergraduate education is sparse, and research on GSE strikes is almost nonexistent (Wickens, 2011). Fiksenbaum, Wickens, Greenglass, and Wiesenthal’s (2012)

study of the York University teaching assistants' 2008 strike is one notable exception: They found that undergraduates were mainly impacted by the uncertainty of the remediation policies rather than the strike itself. Donn, Donn, Goldberg, and Kirby (2014) found that while teachers' unions are frequently criticized for placing teacher rights ahead of quality education, teacher unionization has a negligible impact on the quality of education provided. They go on to say, however, that "it is clear that there is less workplace democracy in school systems without collective bargaining for teachers" (Donn et al., 2014, p. 507). Whether this holds true for GSE unions that represent instructors is unknown. But, in light of the growth in organized labor in higher education, Wickens (2011) is right to surmise that "the frequency of these [labor] disputes is likely to rise in the coming years" (p. 109). The impact of collective GSE action on both graduate and undergraduate education warrants further research.

Financial Support

The wages that GSEs earn seldom meet their needs (Gardner, 2009; Rogers, Eaton, & Voos, 2013). The median educational debt for a recent doctoral degree recipient in psychology in 2013 and 2014 was \$82,000, not including debt incurred for undergraduate studies, suggesting that even after pay earned through student employment, completing a graduate education in psychology requires students to take significant financial risks (Doran et al., 2016). Slightly fewer than half of graduate school dropouts list a lack of financial support as a primary reason for discontinuing their studies, and having adequate financial support was ranked as a more important factor in completing graduate school than receiving adequate mentoring (Gardner, 2009). By negotiating for more competitive compensation, GSE unionization can benefit students and universities alike by improving graduation and retention rates and, in so doing, making graduate programs more attractive to prospective students and entrants into the field.

Student-Parents

Many graduate students choose to start families during graduate school, but very few universities provide paid parental leave, subsidies for childcare, or affordable healthcare for GSEs with dependents. In turn, graduate student-parents struggle to balance academic responsibilities, parental responsibilities, and academic responsibilities—all while living on near-poverty level incomes (Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid, 2009). Given the prohibitive expense of covering a dependent on most student healthcare plans, graduate student-parents from low-income backgrounds are most adversely affected. Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden (2013) argue that policies governing graduate education have not changed to reflect a more diverse graduate school demographic. They recommend that “some of the policies now offered to many faculty could be extended to graduate students” (p. 23), including, but not limited to, family housing, paid parental leave, and providing parent center and lactation rooms. GSE unions advocate for the provision of leave policies and services (e.g., childcare) that help graduate student-parents attend to their responsibilities as GSEs while providing adequate care for their families.

Healthcare

GSEs are typically offered healthcare plans with large out-of-pocket costs and poor coverage for chronic health conditions. Being underinsured contributes to GSEs’ stress and impairs their ability to teach, conduct research, and provide clinical services (Gaulee et al., 2016). While the Affordable Care Act (ACA) allows individuals to remain covered under their parents’ health insurance until the age of 26, not all students have parents who possess a comprehensive healthcare plan, and many students are over the age of 26 for most of their graduate careers. Providing adequate healthcare gives individuals with chronic health problems the support they need finish graduate school and become psychologists.

It is possible that future implementations of the ACA may be able to provide affordable coverage to graduate students in the absence of unionization. Still, concerns about

healthcare remain a pressing concern for GSEs who cannot wait for policy changes that may take years to come into effect. In fact, the ACA's "employer mandate" has led to tax-related complications that have resulted in some universities opting to strip non-unionized GSEs of their healthcare plans, as was the case at the University of Missouri in August of 2015 (Patel, 2015). Not surprisingly, this action by University of Missouri administrators led graduate students there to begin their own GSE unionization drive (Associated Press, 2016). Access to high-quality affordable healthcare is a major concern among GSEs and, as exemplified in Missouri, loss of adequate healthcare coverage can be the spark that ignites an GSE organizing drive.

Union and University Administration

GSE unionization offers many benefits to GSEs, such as improved wages, benefits to student parents, and affordable healthcare, but it is not without its costs. Organized GSE labor creates an added burden for administrators and human relations staff who are legally obligated to handle the collective bargaining negotiations and grievance proceedings initiated by GSE unions. Administrators likewise lament that the standardization imposed by contractual language and the adversarial nature of union-administration relationships detracts from the collegiality of campus life (e.g., Stimpson, 2000). For unionized GSEs, union representation comes with the required payment of member dues or an agency fee. GSEs considering unionization should take into account the costs, both in time and money, that come with GSE unionization.

Impact of GSE Unionization on Training in Health Service Psychology

Whereas many of the impacts on GSE unionization affect graduate education across disciplines in similar ways, some impacts bear uniquely upon graduate training in health service psychology programs. Clinical trainees work under the licenses of the clinicians who supervise them. Even as trainees, however, clinicians and counselors provide direct services to those in need. Therefore, policies governing their workplaces have consequences for their

clients. We highlight the ways in which the internship match imbalance (Doran & Cimbora, 2016) relates to GSE unionization. Lastly, we address how positions taken by the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS) bear significantly upon organized GSE labor.

Quality of Services Provided

While a trainees' work is supervised by licensed professionals, trainees are nevertheless the direct service providers for the patients and clients with whom they work. As such, the factors that influence the quality of care among licensed clinicians pertain equally to trainees. On account of their comparative inexperience, trainees may be more susceptible to the personal and environmental factors that impact experienced clinicians. Schwartz-Mette (2009) warns that students clinicians are especially vulnerable to the ill-effects of burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion) and impairment (i.e., compromised professional competence) due to "the wide variety of demands placed upon them by their training programs" in addition to "long hours, pressures of evaluation. . . and financial concerns" (p. 92). She recommends that student clinicians, supervisors, and program administrators recognize an ethical duty to trainee self-care and create a working environment that support trainee self-care (Schwartz-Mette, 2009).

Unfortunately, self-care is seldom a priority among clinical graduate training programs (Barnett & Cooper, 2009). Barnett and Cooper (2009) recommend that "... a culture of self-care be created within the profession of psychology that emphasizes efforts to maintain psychological wellness at every phase of each psychologist's career" (p. 17, emphasis added). El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh, and Bufka (2012) found that financial hardship comprised the greatest barrier to graduate student well-being, and that students of color were disproportionately affected by graduate school stress. By advocating for livable working conditions, affordable healthcare, and social justice in the workplace, GSE unions help establish academic environments that enable clinical trainees to provide the best services

they possibly can.

The Internship Match Imbalance

The APA Commission on Accreditation (CoA) requires that doctoral students in health service psychology complete a year-long clinical internship prior to the conferral of a doctoral degree (APA, 2013). Graduate programs put forward candidates for internship at rates that exceed the supply of APA-accredited internship positions. This ongoing “internship crisis” (Doran & Cimbora, 2016) drives student clinicians to amass an ever-greater number of predoctoral clinical hours to remain competitive in an overburdened internship match system. For the 2015-2016 match year, 95.3% of students in APA-accredited doctoral programs matched to an internship, and 68.4% of students in APA-accredited doctoral programs matched to an APA-accredited internship (APA Commission on Accreditation, 2015). Compared to an APA-accredited internship match rate of 51.9% at the depths of the crisis in 2011, the 2015 data suggest that the match imbalance may be moving towards resolution (Doran & Cimbora, 2016). Nevertheless, the shortage of accredited internship positions forces students to prolong time-to-degree, either by taking extra time to acquire the necessary predoctoral hours in addition to completing other degree prerequisites (e.g., coursework and dissertation defense), or as a result failing to match for internship. Moreover, the internship application process can be very costly: Given student clinicians’ limited incomes, this is cause for concern—especially for trainees from low-income backgrounds.

Graduate Student Mental Health

Graduate students suffer from mental health issues that warrant greater concern than they receive (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). In Canadian graduate psychology programs, 21% of graduate students have been subjected to workplace bullying in their program, 33% report symptoms of depression, and 6% report severe and impairing levels of depression (Peluso, Carleton, & Asmundson, 2011; Yamada, Cappadocia, & Pepler, 2014). In addition, 70% of graduate APA student affiliates experienced significant personal or professional challenges

that compromised their functioning (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Having access to sufficient funding and enjoying a supportive student-advisor relationship promotes mental health and well-being among psychology graduate students (Peluso, Carleton, & Asmundson, 2011). El-Ghoroury et al. (2012) echo Barnett and Cooper's (2009) call for an increased focused on graduate student self-care. However, these changes may require modifications to policies governing graduate training programs (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Organized labor and professional psychology share a commitment to advancing policies that maintain and enhance mental health (APA, 2015; Lott, 2013). Through collective bargaining, GSE unions advocate for policies that have the support of the psychological community.

American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS)

As of this writing, APAGS has no formal position regarding GSE unionization. However, APAGS's Position Statement on the Rights of Psychology Graduate Students claims a "right for students providing services during training (e.g., teaching, research, clinical, and administrative graduate assistantships) to enjoy the recognitions, rights, privileges, and protections afforded to employees under state, provincial, territorial, and national labor laws" (APAGS, 2015). This position statement further claims rights for psychology graduate students including but not limited to: affordable healthcare, fair compensation for serviced provided, grievance procedures, and the right to participate in organizational activities outside the academic program. APAGS and the GSE unionization movement differ in their scope and purview in important ways. Nevertheless, they share an interest in improving the graduate training experience for their respective constituencies, and their shared beliefs about the rights of graduate students speaks powerfully about the concerns shared by graduate students.

Challenging “Studentism” and Reframing the Role of GSEs in Higher Education

GSE labor activism has experienced rapid growth in the past fifteen years. The Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions lists more than 20 GSE organizing campaigns under way, and fewer than half of currently recognized GSE unions were organized before 2000 (CGEU, 2017). What has driven this growth in organized GSE labor over the past fifteen years?

Looking within psychological discourse, part of the answer may be found in Côté’s (2014) critique of Arnett’s (2000) widely-adopted theory of emerging adulthood. Côté (2014) argues that the notion of emerging adulthood as a new life stage normalizes the prolongation of adult development born out of the social and economic developments of the past three decades, wherein people in their 20s are presumed to postpone efforts to start a career or raise a family in order to explore their identities. Reviving a point made by Tannock (2001), Côté (2014), highlights that “many young people would like to be earning a living wage in a good job ‘now,’ not at some distant point in their late 20s or early 30s” (Côté, 2014, p. 186).

This point bears repeating: GSEs are working adults. Graduate students feel increasingly exploited and marginalized due to the oversaturation of the academic labor market and higher education’s over reliance on cheap GSE labor. As evidenced by APAGS’s Position Statement on the Rights of Psychology Graduate Students and the National Association of Graduate and Professional Students’s (NAGPS) Student Bill of Rights (APAGS, 2015; NAGPS, 2008), GSEs are rejecting an educational and social-developmental model that assumes that graduate students are not adults who merit the resources afforded to adults who do not pursue a graduate education. An insidious belief system, held by many policymakers, assumes that by becoming a graduate student, an individual forfeits a claim to the rights afforded to individuals who enter directly into the workforce. This “studentism” holds that graduate student hazing is an acceptable practice within academia; that today’s graduate students do not deserve better treatment than the graduate students of yesteryear;

that graduate students' work only benefits their training and that the products it yields for higher education are ancillary; that graduate student labor falls exclusively under the purview of academic evaluation and not workplace evaluation; and that poor GSE compensation is justified by the promise of better pay and benefits post-degree. GSEs have diverse motivations for organizing unions. Yet, in our view, this insidious belief system and its corresponding policies—which marginalize, infantilize, and insult the nation's best and brightest young minds—pours fuel on the flames of GSE labor activism nationwide.

Implications for the Profession: A Call to Action

GSE unionization and the role of GSEs in higher education are contentious and complicated (Lafer, 2003; Singh, Zinni, & MacLennan, 2006). As such, they deserve the attention of those working to train and educate psychologists. The impact that the GSE labor movement may have on the future of professional psychology and the clinical training experiences of future psychologists remains unknown and understudied. Psychologists and unions can work together to advance goals of mutual interest (Sullivan, LaGana, Wiggins, & DeLeon, 1997). Based on our experiences as advocates in GSE labor advocacy, the values and expertise of the psychological training community, and ongoing discourse surrounding organized GSE labor in higher education, we wish to draw attention to the following ways in which psychologists can interface with the organized GSE labor movement.

Supporting graduate student mental health. GSE unions advocate for policies that support mental health, such as paid leave and affordable comprehensive healthcare. Paid leave, holidays, and vacation support GSE well-being, and GSE unions advocate for the right of graduate students to enjoy these privileges. Psychologists publicly support this position: The American Psychological Association's (2015) endorsement of policies that establish protected leave time reflects a shared interest in protecting the well-being of hard-working men and women. Despite such commonalities, GSE union advocates are seldom bona fide mental health professionals. Psychologists, and especially those who work with

GSEs, can ally with GSE unions to advocate for institutional policies that support student health. Researchers and therapists who work with GSEs should further assess the impact of workplace conditions on graduate student mental health at their respective universities.

Advancing social justice. GSE unions fight to empower marginalized student groups in higher education. By lobbying for lactation centers, gender-neutral bathrooms, anti-discrimination policies, and handicap-accessible workplaces, GSE unions remove barriers to higher education that affect historically underrepresented groups in psychology. Organized GSE labor's vision for social justice is commensurate with that of professional psychology (APA, 2002; Lafer, 2003). Psychologists should work with GSEs who seek to advance social justice in graduate education through unionization and lend their voices in support of these efforts.

Mitigating conflict. Collective actions and labor strikes are critical tools for making working people's voices heard, but they can also be disruptive. Strikes are the option of last resort for workers who cannot address their needs through bargaining. By addressing GSE job dissatisfaction before it requires redress through collective action, psychologists who work in academic administration, faculty governance, clinical training, and student mentorship can obviate the need for GSE strikes (Wickens, 2011).

Research on organized GSE labor. Few researchers have assessed the impact of GSE unions on student mental health or educational outcomes. Given that GSE unions were scarce until the recent past, this comes as little surprise (Singh, Zinni, & MacLellan, 2006). However, the recent growth of GSE unionization makes the study of its development and its impact on graduate education in psychology both feasible and necessary. Future research should analyze the multiple factors that contribute to the reasons graduate students seek out GSE unionization, the reasons that GSE choose not to pursue unionization, and the role that "studentism" plays in affecting students, faculty, and administrators' attitudes towards GSE unionization.

Respecting graduate students. GSEs deserve to be respected for the work that

they do. As researchers, instructors, and clinicians, GSEs in psychology work hard to advance the aims of the discipline and the profession while training to become independent researchers and practitioners. Still, advocates of “studentism” who find their work unworthy of recognition invalidate their labor on the basis of their student status. Psychologists can change this narrative by recognizing that GSEs, while certainly trainees, are also working adults whose labor makes an essential contribution to the profession of psychology. Faculty members working with students active in GSE organizing campaigns should be aware that GSEs have a legal right under the National Labor Relations Act to form, join, or assist a union. Faculty can demonstrate their support by signing faculty petitions urging university recognition of the GSE union campaign and facilitate open and respectful dialogue between among their students and faculty peers about students’ concerns and the issues involved in GSE unionization.

Conclusion

Our take-home message to psychologists and educators is this: Shun the profession’s historical indifference to organized labor (e.g., Lott, 2013), take the time to listen to GSEs advocates, and understand their reasons for organizing. Graduate students in psychology face significant financial and institutional challenges (e.g., Doran & Cimborra, 2016; Doran et al., 2016). For many GSEs, including ourselves, unionization has provided a means to a better life in graduate school. We cannot predict the future, but we anticipate that rising student debt, lack of affordable healthcare, and chronic institutional injustice will lead future students to organize on their campuses, just as we have done on ours. The voice of professional psychology has yet to be heard in the national conversation about organized GSE labor: We hope that our work stimulates a long-overdue conversation within the training community on this important subject.

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Footnotes

¹We use the term "graduate student employee" (GSE) to encompass all individuals who are students enrolled in graduate-degree granting programs who are paid to perform teaching, research, clinical, or administrative services for their hiring institutions. GSEs are commonly referred to as graduate employees, graduate assistants, graduate teachers, graduate researchers, teaching assistants, and/or research assistants. Not all graduate students in graduate psychology programs qualify as GSEs.

²The first author, a graduate student in clinical psychology, participated in his GSE union's organizing campaign and collective bargaining negotiations. The second author, a graduate student in social psychology, helped organize a union strike with his GSE union. The third author, a former graduate student in educational psychology, was president of her local GSE union.

³Owing to GSOC-UAW's recognition in 2000 following the New York University (2000) decision, subsequent

640 loss of recognition in 2005 and six-month long strike following the Brown University (2004) decision, and
641 voluntary re-recognition in 2013, GSOC-UAW has played a central role in the development of legal precedents
642 concerning GSE unionization in the United States. A complete history of GSOC-UAW's activities can be
643 found at <http://www.makingabetternyu.org/gsocuaw/our-history/>. See also Lafer (2003).