Bill Hendricks generously credits me with “a cogent account of how social sorting works in higher education” in *Work Time*. As written nearly twenty years ago, however, it has to some extent “been overtaken by history” and is in need of updating (599). To say the least (as he also points out) there’s been a lot of rapid change in higher education recently—or at least it now seems more visible. So let me begin by adding to his own update suggestions, in relation to a couple of crucial themes of his larger argument about academic capitalism and the shift of college teaching from a middle class to a working class job. As he explains, the latter perhaps remains a speculative proposition, but I think there are some further arguments to support his claims.

In his updating of my argument in *Work Time* he suggests that grades are less important now, since “colleges nowadays need students as much as students need them” and consequently are less intent on using GPAs to refuse admissions (599). But among other things grades also function as a signifier of competition, and while Hendricks seems to me entirely right that the social significance of grades themselves is less important than twenty years ago, at the same time competition has intensified. And that includes competition among colleges for student dollars. Grades have often been imagined as if congruent with a quite classical description of what makes competition fair and equitable. Yet,
even as an ideal fiction this conception has little to do with how competition now works. As one student remarked to me after class, “It’s like there’s nowhere you can go around here without everybody competing over everything.” Hendricks begins the body of his essay by emphasizing students and the importance of understanding their working conditions. It seems to me that the student’s perception of pervasive competition is crucial to that task.

The idea of a fair competition assumes specific boundary conditions rather than appearing everywhere all the time. To follow out the familiar cliché, it’s impossible to “level the playing field” without first assuming a distinct field of competition boundaried off from surrounding territory and functioning for the purposes of competition as entirely separate from whatever diverse valleys or hilly sectors the competitors have emerged. Fairness conflicts have often become almost intolerably frustrating, however, because the intensification of competition affects the determination of boundary conditions and not simply the rules establishing fairness or the behavior of competitors. That is, it’s not that competition has become so cutthroat and standards so degraded that fairness is jeopardized by competitors and others willing to break the rules to win. It’s that the very idea of fairness requires a field that is clearly distinct from other fields, and intensification displaces the boundaries that establish distinctness. The result is that any given competitive territory seems immediately open to other territories, where the outcomes of the competition are then affected by considerably more than what happens on a specifically determined “playing field,” level or not.

The perception of grade inflation, for example, is probably a more common explanation for the diminishing significance of grades than Hendricks suggests. The idea is that something must have gone wrong with both standards and the rules of competition enforcing them such that far too many students get grades that are far too high. But with the displacement of field boundaries from intensified competition, what might appear at the micro level of any specific classroom or even educational institution as inflated grading looks on a macro level like an extension of a competitive
grading process spreading through more, and increasingly more diverse, sectors of the social formation generally. In one form or another grading like everything else seems caught in always expanding networks of relation. Quite rightly, students must worry about not only how well they do in relation to other students in their classes or even in their schools, but also how well their particular institution stacks up with other institutions in terms of job placement or grad school admissions. In other words you have to worry about the potential consequences of getting a B here as opposed to an A- there, or compensating for here by getting an A whereas a B might have sufficed there or somewhere else altogether.

The extensions go on through more and more complexities of distinction across more and more social sectors, including as Hendrick rightly points out dealing with the competing claims of available financing versus future debt, or the potential lure of a more prestigious institution, and so on. Time seems to speed up as competition intensifies, always accelerating the flow of effects across multiple territories. That sustained long moment of isolated competitive encounters valorized in classical conceptions of competition seems no longer available, no such duration possible. It’s as if at any given moment one is already forced to inhabit a future dragging along the results of previous encounters while simultaneously trying to glimpse what seems to be happening two or three sectors alongside and ahead as they shape the current “field.”

This intensification of competition seems to me to help produce what Hendricks nicely conceptualizes in larger terms as a shift away from the ideologies of “merit” I had argued as so important in *Work Time*: “‘Merit’ is still a big player in higher education’s social imaginary. But ‘merit’ is no longer hegemonic, having nowadays to share the ideological stage with two powerful new actors, ‘choice’ and ‘results’” (600). Merit determinations must depend on a perception of classical conceptions of fair competition at work: here’s the field, here’s the competitors, and if all’s fair the best will emerge. Boundary jumping competition in contrast valorizes choice and results because they function as nodal points of exchange allowing an always more expansive competitive territory. Merit survives, but
only as a kind of psychological afterimage stabilizing some chi-
merical “winner identity” to the assemblage of right choices made
somewhere in the past that yielded productive results—for the
moment.

The pervasiveness and intensity of competition, and the em-
phasis on choice and results, describe the conditions that help to
understand the statistics about students Hendricks provides early
in his essay. More and more students are engaged in some form
of postsecondary education (you can’t not compete), but the
graduation rates with a four-year degree have remained relatively
stable for some time and show a considerable differential between
top and bottom quartiles. Put another way, this means a larger and
larger mass of students are spending considerable time and
money in doing some kind of work in educational institutions. At the
same time, they’re not necessarily emerging with even the paper
credentials for access to better paying and more satisfying jobs
and the fulfillment of the rising social expectations that may well
have taken them to postsecondary education in the first place. The
quotation from Marc Bousquet that introduces the section of
Hendricks’ essay entitled “From Middle Class Careers to Working
Class Jobs: Decertifying Academic Labor” suggests that “we now
have to recognize that in many circumstances the [PhD] degree
holder is the ‘waste product’ of a labor system that primarily makes
use of graduate schools to maintain a pool of cheap workers” (595).
But before institutions and the larger economy gain from the “waste
labor” cheap workers that are produced by graduate schools there
must first exist the waste labor of more and more postsecondary
students taking classes and doing work daily while also destined
to belong to the pool of anonymous “losers” by “highly competitive”
circumstances where they didn’t ever quite make the “right choices.”

A large, undifferentiated pool of available labor sounds a lot like
the familiar Marxian concept of a reserve army, but the differences
are significant. Individual members of a reserve army of labor in
Marx’s sense could and often did possess considerable work skills.
For business interests, however, the purpose served by a reserve
army was hardly a function of such individual skills. In contrast, a
"waste labor" army of competitive "losers" is available to step into comparatively very skilled or at least very specialized labor, across quite a wide range of positions, usually in ways that don't differ appreciably from how it might be performed by a more "elite" pool. At the level of the graduate school work Bousquet refers to, in aggregate terms the daily work of graduate teaching assistants at their second, third or fourth choices of graduate programs where they were finally admitted likely doesn't really differ from the daily practices of those TAs who would have been doing the teaching had they not instead competitively "succeeded" to their first choice of programs and gone elsewhere. Among students taking a very wide range of available postsecondary courses and students in certificate programs, "new work knowledges and skills" are demonstrably necessary, as Hendricks points out, and those pulled out of the pool of "waste labor" must have acquired those knowledges and skills (600).

In sum, to the extent that Hendricks' largest thesis can be argued, that "college teaching is becoming a predominantly working class occupation," it is a particular kind of working class occupation (588). The positioning is dictated by the conditions of the—needless to say—large working class labor pool skilled and shaped in postsecondary education, much as they might have been by vocational education programs in the first half of the twentieth century. Vocational education programs were initiated early in the century to train a working class for industrial capitalism. As I argue in my forthcoming Class Degrees: Vocational Education, Work, and Class Formation in the United States, the multiple complexities of postsecondary education now function in structurally similar ways in working class formation on behalf of whatever version of Capitalism XP we're currently dealing with. If most college teaching is well on the way to becoming a working class occupation, that's because it is engaged in the training and overseeing of the "waste labor" by postsecondary student populations.

While complaints about the "corporatization" of universities are certainly common, in their Academic Capitalism and the New
Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education, from which Hendricks frequently quotes, Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades highlight a specific anomaly in the comparison: "In contrast to the pattern in industry, where the numbers of middle managers have declined, colleges and universities have greatly expanded middle management, whether to supervise commercial endeavor and engagement with various external communities or to support students and information technology." The result is that "expenditures for administration go up, while expenditures for teaching go down" (332). While corporations were often ruthlessly eliminating middle management positions throughout the 1990s, university organizational structure would appear to have changed in almost the opposite direction, adding management often in dramatic numbers. Nor is it only full time administrative positions at issue. Much faculty time is also taken up with administrative duties, usually with a course or two "release" from teaching. In his introduction to Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University, Marc Bousquet notes that while composition jobs now seem plentiful and research possibilities more available, "persons holding the rhet-comp PhD will frequently expect to serve the managed university as management," not as researchers or even primarily as teachers. As he goes on to point out, the instructors "whose labor is overseen by the holder of the rhet-comp PhD are commonly persons who have experience of graduate study in other fields of English—current or former graduate students working as flexible labor, rather than as colleagues" (3).

I don't think the explanation for the specifically academic growth pattern lies in the commercial endeavors or the community relations that Slaughter and Rhoades suggest college administrators must now perform, and hardly in administrative efforts "to support students and information technology," which is largely done by faculty and staff. It has to do with the increasingly complex hierarchies and the battery of tasks that make up the management of that "waste labor" army, as the management operation negotiates a powerful contradiction imposed on educational institutions
by the dynamics of class processes. On the one hand, as I suggested above, waste labor is not a reserve army available in mass for unskilled labor. "Waste" in this sense is the repository of long hours of educational labor of exactly the same kind as competitively successful labor, and likewise spread across a considerable spectrum of skills. It must be in order to step into whatever sequence of needs in production or services. Thus it's not "congealed" labor either, but rather a kind of accumulated labor time temporarily depotentiated as it were, awaiting its hail into production time as required and meanwhile a prime repository for the eventual realization of surplus value elsewhere. In other words, the actual production of this kind of skilled labor requires contiguity and continuities among those being trained, the relatively seamless contact provided by educational institutions making available similar training to students in mass.

On the other hand, however, competitive intensities require just the opposite of these continuities, as instead a stark distance separating the "winner" from the mass of also-rans. Whatever interval might be rationalized as significantly separating gold from silver, A from A-, corporate fast-track from downsized, and so on, the winning position must seem deserved. There must be endless rationales for practices that produce the competitive differential of the "winner." Winning must be seen as having involved just that little bit extra of competitive fire and innovation on the part of the winner—and of course the right choice—that permits the psychological afterimage of "winner identity" in brilliant spot, isolated from the dark mass of the rest. More often than not the effects can be recognized in the classroom as a kind of student desperation for A or nothing. The stark contrast between winner-as-spotlighted and losers-as-anonymous mass doesn't really need the support of that elaborate system of scaled grades built up around ideologies of merit. What all this does require is to appear in exactly the opposite terms from the continuities of skilling required in the systematic production of waste labor.

There can't be enough management anywhere to "manage" that contradiction in all its tedious, extended, specific, and every-
day detail as it plays into the dynamics of dominant class processes. This is why in contrast to corporations that college and university administration continually increases. The complexities involved usually also mean increasingly elaborate hierarchies among those engaged in some way in administrative and managerial work. The differences are enormous between salaries and benefits supplied to the top administrators across the University of California system, for example (as the *San Francisco Chronicle* has been reporting recently) and the salaries and benefits of even long-term lecturers who must fight for a one or two course release each year from an already heavy teaching load to handle the immense daily responsibilities of running composition programs. Many of the differences across the spectrum of administrative managerial work of course have to do with the differences within student groups. Hendricks admits not really addressing how it is that “getting a foot in the door or even finding the door is related not just to social class and family income but to race, ethnicity, and language,” although he is clearly aware of the issues (610). Yet, as all these factors intensify within the student population they also result in more and more complex divisions among college teachers and administrator managers.

Given Hendricks’ closing speculations about the future of unions, however, with his reminder of legal decisions involving personnel with management functions, my terminology above presents several difficulties. To borrow badly from Gramsci, in some sense every college teacher is a “manager,” overseeing student work among other things, and it’s that idea I’m extending by thinking specifically about the direction of “managing” labor contradictions produced by current forms of dominant class processes. But of course not every teacher is designated as an administrator, though just as obviously the same person can be designated as both. Despite these kinds of difficulties, however, I would certainly argue against any adoption of institutional classificatory designators as also pointing directly to class differences. My one substantial disagreement with Hendricks’ argument concerns the assumption he borrows from Michael Zweig that class is a
function of "relative standing in power relations at work and in the larger society" (qtd. in Hendricks 589). While for me a welcome shift away from a more empirically sociological focus on income and lifestyle, "relative standing in power relations" doesn't offer much critical leverage against simply accepting institutional classifications which also in some sense reflect power differences. More importantly, without a lot of stretching the idea doesn't seem likely to yield the major and familiar three part division both Zweig and Hendricks use. All the intricacies and complexities I've sketched very quickly above involve differentials of power relations. Except perhaps at the extremes, however, as in my UC system administrators and UC lecturers example, it seems arbitrary just to cut through at some point to say "this is working class" or "this is middle class." In any case, a great many factors besides class function in the production of power differentials, and the ensemble of relations is too easily obscured by the conflation.

I can't pretend to parse Marx completely on the concept of class by any means, but however his explanations are understood in detail he always connects class in some way to which direction the results of labor exploitation go, with surplus labor moving to you or away from you. Thus, typically Marxist analysis has assumed college teachers to be located within the distribution systems of accumulated surplus value, at a remove from the direct exploitation of others if also drawing on the surplus afforded by their work. If there is the kind of shift Hendricks speculates from college teachers as middle class to college teachers as working class, it might then be grasped in terms of college teachers being moved out of relatively more secure locations in distribution systems and more directly inserted into the positions of exploited labor—not because certain groups are paid less than they should be or have less power and control over their work, but as groups whose work yields surplus labor. Thus, the difference in class terms, for example, between low ranking managerial functions carried out every day along with a heavy teaching load on the one hand, and upper level administration on the other, can't immediately be conceptualized as involving power or control. The class-based aspects of power
differentials result from a location within a dominant class process of distribution in the latter case, while the work of low ranking teacher-managers in contrast is intricately directly with students within the system of producing the “waste labor” that supplies one of the extensive bases required for current forms of direct labor exploitation.

In closing, then, let me follow Hendricks’ suggestions about unionization by adding the possibility of continuing to explore specific kinds of union organized relations with student groups. The postsecondary population after all is less than ever a uniform group of 18 to 21 year olds. Given current directions of intensified competition and labor exploitation, students almost anywhere within that population have a huge stake in future directions, especially those students from traditionally excluded groups—often in common with groups of faculty, at least far more so than either faculty or students have with upper level administrators who work to enforce the managerial function of college and university training. The long term cliché of course has always had it that colleges are “about” students and faculty. Perhaps it’s time to think more extensively and specifically about how best to make that an organizational, collective reality as well as a good idea.

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Class, Class Consciousness, and "Good Teaching Jobs": A Response to Bill Hendricks

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Bill Hendricks covers a lot of territory in his essay "Teaching Work: Academic Labor and Social Class." I read Hendricks as aiming primarily to provoke consideration of a host of issues. Thus, my response is intended not as a critique of his essay but more an enactment of the kinds of considerations I take him to be calling for. Specifically, I'll comment on those parts of his essay that suggest that instructors—tenure and nontenure track, full and part-time—are increasingly "working class," and that this will encourage increasing numbers of these instructors to identify as a collective with a, or the, labor movement, in the form of unionization across the track of tenure lines. In support of the first of these points, Hendricks marshals not only the depressing and depressingly familiar data on the increasing reliance on contingent labor to staff college-level teaching positions, the lousy working conditions of those holding these positions (low pay and lack of job security, work autonomy, and health insurance), the privatization of funding for all institutions of higher education, and the growing commodification of that education, but also attacks on the professional managerial class (PMC) status of all academics as well as those in such other fields as law and medicine. While some readers may wish to quibble with some of the specific data Hendricks presents, the general trend seems clear: colleges and universities