

# 1.

## Introduction

*Until recently I had never thought of the university as a place where labor and goods were bought and sold, but rather as a place where people exchange and share ideas freely, where the mind is encouraged to think, learn, explore, and grow.... I now know that universities have never existed in such an ideal form, and certainly not for all people. Furthermore, the concept of the university as somehow separate from an "outside world" is, of course, a strictly imaginary one.*

—Amy Freeman, "The Spaces of Graduate Student Labor:  
The Times for a New Union," 248

## Research questions

As a progressive student arriving at Swarthmore College for the first time, I remember, I was thrilled to discover the Swarthmore Living Wage and Democracy Campaign. So much of my high school activism had felt quixotic. We protested against the World Trade Organization and the sanctions on Iraq, but the United States government took no notice, and even our years of pushing the Seattle School District to adopt a multicultural curriculum had so far yielded no tangible results.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the intensely local scale of the Living Wage Campaign appealed—it seemed an opportunity to make a concrete difference. The principle of a living wage explored visionary moral terrain on a national scale, yet it also seemed winnable in the context of this small, very wealthy college. Furthermore, I liked the locational consciousness of these student activists whose work I joined. The campaign acknowledged and drew upon the reality of students' position of privilege in the institution. We sought to use the freedom and safety of our student role to hold the administration accountable to its rhetorical commitment to

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<sup>1</sup> The Seattle School District has since given ground on this issue.

social justice. In so doing, I believed, we would ultimately be working to decrease the social inequality manifested in the organization of the college—deploying our privilege in the project of its own unmaking. I threw myself into the effort with enthusiasm, and it has continued to absorb me throughout my time here.

As the years have passed and my involvement in the Campaign has deepened, I have come to doubt my initial easy assessment of how student organizing could function to undo privilege. Although I remain enthusiastic about what I see as the goals of the movement, I have continually re-framed my own conceptions of those goals and how to achieve them. I have watched other student activists here grapple with many of the same problems. At moments of critical strategy decisions for the campaign, our striving surfaces in impassioned pleas and deeply felt conflicts. Somehow, in the constant urgency of the political moment, there is never enough time to fully sort out the underlying principles of our work—although, indeed, it is a matter not only of taking the time, but also of finding knowledge outside our own experiences. We are all young and inexperienced—and so is our movement as a whole, a movement which is really just now gaining steam. Just in the early spring of 2005, as I worked on this thesis, the news media carried stories about dramatic student labor actions at Washington University in Saint Louis, at Georgetown University, and at the University of California. In this moment of exciting innovation, where are the historical, where the theoretical foundations for our work?

I yearn for a more carefully grounded praxis. I am increasingly concerned that student activists at Swarthmore—and perhaps in student labor action groups across the country—lack a clear vision for how to shift constructively the relations of power in our

schools. In fact, while we can see and claim victories in increasing wages and benefits, I fear we are not even sure how to ascertain how we may be affecting the social dynamics of the workplaces that are also our schools. This is dangerous, because our campaigns may not only be failing to achieve democracy in campus workplaces—we may actually be harming that goal. Organizations like United Students Against Sweatshops use inter-campus networking to provide valuable tactical support on pursuing material economic objectives, but on a national scale I know of no conversation within the movement about an ideological framework for how, and on what grounds, we seek to *socially* transform our campus communities.

I conceived of this project as a first step towards filling that void. I set out to write a case study of a college living wage campaign that was unfamiliar to me, situating myself as a sympathetic outsider, but drawing on the issues and concerns that my own experiences at Swarthmore had raised for me. I could not, of course, theorize the entire national movement on the basis of one or two cases, nor should that project fall to any one scholar—but through my analysis I hope to generate hypotheses and begin to draw together, from various realms of study, the literature relevant to student labor activism. With living wage campaigns sprouting up all over the United States, this is a dynamic and potentially very fruitful direction for research. In fact, as important as the specifics of the college campus context are to my analysis, I believe that this work also has implications for scholarship focused on organizing and power even in off-campus contexts. Specifically, I think that the issues surrounding the student living wage movement speak directly to the question of what roles people of privilege play in anti-oppression movements.

At the same time, I hope to produce a work of crossover relevance between the worlds of academia and social activism—and who better to bridge that gap than student activists? This thesis should not only contribute to an ongoing body of scholarship, but also prove an immediately useful tool for living wage campaigners. To that end, in this case study I have sought to identify issues and patterns that students and others pursuing campus-based social change can use as frames for critiquing and strategizing their own work, and about how they may affect the social contexts of their institutions. By providing a starting point for discussion, I hope to prompt conversation among student activists around the country about the framing assumptions and goals of our movement on both the national and local scales.

When I set out to do my field research, I conceived the central question of this thesis thus: *In this case, what effect—if any—did student living-wage activism have on the power of college staff members—both direct employees and contracted workers—in their employment situations?* I asked it this way because I could see several hypothetical and, to me, plausible answers. On the one hand, perhaps student activism increases the power of staff, such as by drawing public attention and legitimacy to workplace issues. On the other hand, perhaps student activism decreases the power of staff—if, for instance, the voices of students draw the public focus away from staff members' own articulations of their needs and concerns. Of course, since power is not a simple unitary phenomenon, these two possibilities are not mutually exclusive, and elements of both may be at play. However, it is also possible that neither occurs—that, while students may win material changes in the employment policies of their college, their work has no effect at all on the degree to which college staff members influence their own work environments.

I designed my interview questions with this central set of hypotheses in mind, but as I engaged in these conversations and then read and analyzed the texts, I began to feel that the real questions I could and should address with this project were somewhat different. I was not really in a position to effectively investigate change over time, much less causality—the one month that I was there conducting interviews is essentially a single frozen instant in the time scale of these changes at the college. Instead, I could deal with how, in this single moment, people talk about how things are and how they are changing. Rather than trying to discover what effects student labor activists have had, I decided to investigate the context in which they act and the various discourses at play around workplace democracy and fair labor issues in this case. I have grown particularly interested in how different constituencies observe the processes of democratization and corporatization unfolding at Pseudonym. Since I am wearing my academic hat (rather than my activist hat) here, I do not focus on developing a specific political agenda for student labor action. Instead, I have undertaken to discover and describe the issues at stake, and the discursive choices available, in the formation of a principled basis for action. I have tried to write a thesis that I, in my other hat, would find useful in informing the ideology and strategy of my work.

Conceptions of an appropriate role for student labor activists must, in my view, rely closely on some answer to the question of how workplace change takes place in the absence of students. It has been easy for students to construct our own role as necessary by highlighting the ways in which organizing is less risky and more convenient for us than it is for college employees, and for low-wage employees in particular. It is hard to argue with the truth that most students are in a situation of relative safety, but if we leap

from there to a model of workplace organizing with students at its center, we are obscuring the agency of employees and ignoring the long history of workers who have organized themselves and advocated for their own interests even in situations of great personal risk. Clearly, the presence of students is not a necessary element of labor activism. What happens when we insert students as an additional ingredient into the dynamics of a workplace? Are student solidarity organizations a help, a hindrance, or an ambiguous actor in relation to worker-initiated change? Does it matter whether students are following workers' lead or directing their own efforts?

Besides the presence of students, who comprise an unusual category of actors not present in many workplaces, a college or university is a strange social institution in numerous other ways. The history of its power structure—in terms of the tradition of faculty governance, for instance—is unlike any other kind of workplace I am aware of. It may also be argued that in certain senses, academic institutions have been subjected to both more and less critical scrutiny of their employment practices than corporations have—more, because colleges with their altruistic social commitments are held to a higher standard, and less, because colleges, unlike corporations, are assumed to be inherently more fair. A private college occupies a kind of strange liminal space, being a non-profit, mission-driven institution, but simultaneously a big employer which tends to see itself (increasingly, I think) as the marketer of a product, its particular brand of education, to its consumers, the students—who are also, in a certain sense, its advertising and the manifestations of its product. How do these conflicting conceptions of the college's character play out in the relationships among its various constituencies? In particular, how do they shape the college as a workplace and an employer?

Finally, and perhaps most confusingly, higher educational institutions occupy a conflicted position in relation to socioeconomic class. In the United States, education is touted as the primary pathway to class mobility, and many academic institutions, through such programs as financial aid and affirmative action, make concrete commitments to expanding educational access and addressing structural inequalities. At the same time, one primary outcome of higher education is to train, credentialize, and socialize students for membership in the ruling classes. In trumpeting their own importance, colleges participate in the intense valorization of formal higher education that is often invoked as a justification for the class structure in general and wage inequality in particular. How does an institution that claims to promote social equality through educational access see its responsibilities towards those employees who do not have college degrees—and towards those who do? And how, if at all, do student activists relate their identities as beneficiaries of a class-reinforcing institution to their work on campus labor issues?

I conceive of these questions of power, social inequality, ideology, and transformation as primarily sociological. I am interested in how power inequalities function at Pseudonym College, and how different groups at the college understand their own roles and relate to one another. My data consist primarily of a series of semi-structured interviews that revolve around the questions I have articulated above, and I use the method of grounded theory to analyze these texts and to generate hypotheses to address these sociological questions. (See Bernard, 462-3)

Before conducting the research, I was able to frame hypotheses only in general and simplistic terms (as above—student activism increases staff power; student activism decreases staff power; or student activism has no effect on staff power). While useful in

the initial framing of the project, these hypotheses were too abstract to be testable—and even if they could be tested, the answers would be too vague to be useful. What kinds of student work have what effects? How do we measure power in the workplace? As yet, only a small body of literature directly addresses these issues in the college context. I chose a single, interview-intensive case study to generate a sense of what factors and what outcomes may be at stake in student labor activism.

### **Literature review**

As I have intimated, so far only a small amount of literature seems to exist about the campus living wage movement in particular. In his 2003 book, *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements*, Dan Clawson reflects on possible new directions for revitalizing the labor movement in the United States. One illuminating chapter recounts how organizing by the Student Labor Action Coalition at Wesleyan University led to unionization of custodial workers and the university's acceptance of an employer code of conduct. Clawson highlights three new strengths of the campus living wage movement: the movement's ability to reach low-wage workers whom more traditional forms of labor organizing might have ignored; the "energy, excitement, and sense of mission" of a social movement; and the potentially long-term coalitions built between labor and other groups. (164-5) At the same time, he warns of the danger that living wage campaigns can abdicate what has been an important framing principle of the labor movement, the principle of self-determination. When non-workers take it upon themselves to speak "on behalf of workers," they may have the effect of "raising wages and winning benefits," but not of "empowering workers—giving them a voice, a capacity to influence the



circumstances of their own lives.” (166) I share Clawson’s concern, and in my own case study I draw upon his framing of this critical question.

Perhaps it is too early yet for anyone to write survey literature analyzing the campus living wage movement as a whole. A few case studies exist, including Corey Dolgon’s “Building Community amid the Ruins: Strategies for Struggle from the Coalition for Justice at Southampton College;” Robert Wilton and Cynthia Cranford’s “Toward an Understanding of the Spatiality of Social Movement: Labor Organizing at a Private University in Los Angeles;” and several short accounts in *Students Against Sweatshops*, by Liza Featherstone and United Students Against Sweatshops. Most of these describe struggles within the last ten years. I look to these works for parallels with, as well as divergences from, my own case study; I also seek to build on the initial steps they take towards a general theoretical framework for analyzing campus living wage movements. Wilton and Cranford, for instance, work to synthesize contemporary social movements theorists with the recent theory on the social implications of space. (375)

Although very little literature currently addresses campus living wage campaigns per se, a broader range of work deals with labor and power within colleges and universities. A growing body of work focuses on academic labor, and in particular on the work of adjunct professors and teaching assistants. Of course, there are important differences between large universities and small colleges, between public and private institutions, and across other kinds of categorical differences as well. Nonetheless, some important themes carry over from one case to another. Both Amy Freeman’s “The Spaces of Graduate Student Labor: The Times for a New Union” and David Noble’s

“Digital Diploma Mills” have greatly helped me in understanding some contemporary arguments around the implications of corporatization for higher education.

Questions of class are central to any account of power, but especially one that takes place in the space of an institution so tightly and contradictorily bound to class construction. A number of works directly address class in college spaces. Daniel Cogan’s short, incisive 1998 essay, “Seeing Power in a College Cafeteria,” plays an important role in my understanding of class in the higher education context. Cogan, from his perspective as a student documentary videographer, focuses especially on visual/spatial factors as he explores how cafeteria workers are rendered structurally invisible to students, and recounts how a collective video project challenged those structures.

What is the class position of college students? It is a tricky question. Class is often linked to type of employment, but many full-time college students are employed for limited hours or not at all, because schoolwork is their full-time job. Of course, being able to pay for college without working for wages is a privilege dependent upon the financial resources of one’s family, and not all students have this luxury. Should we read students’ class status from their family’s occupations, or from the occupations for which they expect to qualify after graduating? Before graduation, students occupy a liminal place, performing unpaid work—indeed, often paying high tuition for the opportunity to do this work—which is understood to be for their own benefit.

David Smith’s 1974 *Who Rules the Universities?* presents a Marxist perspective on how institutions of higher education produce and reproduce class structures in the United States. Smith reflects upon the argument “that the contemporary middle class is more

privileged than the working class,” their privilege consisting of “a combination of higher levels of income, higher levels of education, less oppressive job conditions, and the absorption of a set of ‘middle class values.’” (180) Whatever their family backgrounds, students by definition have access to higher education, and I would argue that elite colleges like Pseudonym both teach and reward middle-class values. As for income, students come from a range of backgrounds, but as a group we are probably of a much higher average family income than are non-students. Smith, however, rejects this linking of class to social privilege, concluding that class is “definable *in structural terms* as the relationship people have to the process of production.” (180) In other words, our class status is defined by “whether or not we are forced to sell our labor power for a wage smaller in value than the products of our labor,” not by our level of education or our ownership to commodities. (181) In Smith’s assessment, then, most students—like most other people—are working-class, except for the few who are members of the ruling class, those who own the means of production. Differences of privilege—due to things like education level and social values—are still important, even “essential for full-scale political analysis,” he writes, but such privilege is part of the political superstructure, rather than the economic structure; “it changes the *appearance* of the class structure, but not its *essence*.” (183)

But Pierre Bourdieu makes an opposing claim. In his book *Distinction* and elsewhere, he posits the existence of three mutually convertible currencies: social capital, cultural capital, and economic capital. [cite!] Whereas for Smith the social and cultural are simply the trappings of an economic basis, for Bourdieu the three are equal and inter-reliant components in the production of class status. In Bourdieu’s analysis, attending a

college like Pseudonym confers upon its students not only a body of cultural capital in the form of classroom knowledge and other skills, but also, probably more crucially, the social capital of a degree and opportunities to network with other high-status people.

Sociologist Loïc Wacquant, in an introduction to Bourdieu's *The State Nobility*, notes that, in Bourdieu's analysis,

the granting of an elite degree is not so much a “rite of passage” à la Van Gennep as a rite of institution: it does not demarcate a before and an after so much as it differentiates—and elevates—those destined to occupy eminent social positions from those over whom they will lord. It evokes reverence for and consecrates them, in the strongest sense of the term, that is, it makes them sacred (anyone who has attended a commencement ceremony at a major British or American university cannot but be struck by their archaic religious feel that would have delighted Robertson Smith). As the etymology of the word “credentials,” credentialis, giving authority (derived in turn from credere, to believe), testifies, the bestowal of a diploma is the climactic moment in a long cycle of production of collective faith in the legitimacy of a new form of class rule. (1995)

Students, of course, are not yet the authoritative bearers of college diplomas, but (barring misfortune or change of plans) they are earmarked for it, and for the social, cultural, and economic privilege that it will confer. Not everyone attending college—even an expensive, selective, fairly high-status college, like Pseudonym—will become rich or will end up owning the means of production. However, nearly all members of ruling classes will attend elite colleges. Attending means a chance to network with them and perhaps to acquire enough capital to buy one's way into their ranks, in Bourdieu's analysis.

Undeniably, college attendance also confers privilege in employment opportunities.

College graduates, if they do not become academics, are expected to become professionals. Some people I met who were employed at Pseudonym were also alumni of the college, but they tended to be administrators rather than support staff. I am fairly

certain that no graduate of the college works in dining or custodial services, jobs which pay much less.

Adding to the complication of students' status is their peculiar role in the institution. Students occupy a different relationship to power within their colleges than they do elsewhere in the world. Featherstone quotes this observation from student activist Todd Pugatsch: "we can think of the university itself as a brand, a logo, that students consume." (30) As consumers, students wield a certain kind of influence—what the scholar Leon Epstein has described (in another 1974 work, *Governing the University*) as a kind of "consumer sovereignty." (161) The more that education comes to be viewed as a commodity, and the more that corporate rhetoric prioritizes customer satisfaction at the expense of worker fairness, the more that this consumer role confers apparent power upon students. Yet, as Epstein also notes, because they are not employees of the institution, students' potential for collective action is limited to the boycott rather than the more powerful strike. (180)

Unlike consumers of most other kinds of products, students are actually involved in the process of production. They do labor, although not for wages. In a certain sense, one could argue that, as consumer-workers, students actually benefit from the full value of their (not to mention other people's) labor, making them unusual workers under capitalism. Indeed, as Epstein points out, through government subsidies or endowment funds, students generally receive an education whose actual cost far exceeds what they—or their parents—pay for it. (161)

Sociologist Erik Olin Wright articulates "an exploitation-centred concept of class" as "the complex intersection of three form of exploitation: exploitation based on the

ownership of capital assets, the control of organization assets and the position of skill or credential assets.” (109) He writes, “While I have some reservations about the class character of the third of these categories, this reconceptualization nevertheless has resolved many of the difficulties I had encountered with my previous approach to class structure.” (109-110) The decision to include this third category suggests that, like Bourdieu, Wright would classify students’ acquisition of academic credentials becomes one aspect of their class position. Whereas Bourdieu emphasizes the way different forms of capital work together and one can be skillfully parlayed into another, Wright stresses the potential for his three aspects to work against one another in particular cases, so that people can occupy “contradictory locations within exploitation relations.” (111) This is his explanation for the “middle class”—that its members are “*simultaneously* exploiters and exploited.... My guess is that most of these individuals and families are still more capitalistically exploited than they are exploiters through other mechanisms.

Nevertheless, this does not obliterate the fact that they are exploiters and that, as a result, they have material interests which are fundamentally different from those of workers.” (111-112) This model—in which the various components of one’s class position may be contradictory—makes Wright perhaps the most useful of the class theorists I examined in working out how to classify students. In this thesis I try to bear in mind the Wrightian tension between the ways in which students are privileged and the ways in which they are marginalized at Pseudonym.

To cope not only with the ambiguous position of students, but also with the complexity and contradiction of social organization at Pseudonym College more generally, Michel Foucault’s analysis of power has been a crucially helpful tool for me.

For example, Foucault argues that courts, while apparently dedicated to serving justice, in fact function to subvert the popular justice by linking decision-making authority to a conception of the rational, objective, disinterested judge. (14-19) To a certain extent, I believe that these claims about the judicial system may be applied to college committee processes as well. More expansively, his conception of as a fluid, circulating medium has been vital to my analysis of a situation where—although so many people spoke to me of hierarchy—a model of simple, coherent stratification would not be adequate to describe the multiple, shifting relationships among the various campus constituencies.

In addition to comparing my own data with similar cases and specific analyses of college contexts, I try in this thesis to draw together several strands of theory to build an interpretive framework for the case and for the movement as a whole. From the social movements theorists Sidney Tarrow, James Jasper and others, I extract those aspects of the theory I see as applicable to student living wage campaigns, as well as reflecting on the ways that such campaigns diverge from these theorists' definitions of social movements. The definitional ambivalence hinges upon the question of whether organizing led by one group but, in Clawson's phrase, "on behalf of" another, can be called a movement. I therefore focus especially on the topics of coalitions, solidarity movements, and the roles of those who will not benefit directly from the cause being celebrated. In social movements literature, these people are sometimes formally called "conscience constituents"—a term I would roughly translate into activist parlance as "allies."

Finally—because I am interested in setting forward proposals for what can and should be done in the living wage movement—I examine theories of how to confront

difference and inequality in community discourses. Central to my conceptions of these issues are insights about democracy from political theorist Iris Marion Young. Young distinguishes between deliberative and aggregative democracy, arguing, not unlike Hannah Arendt, for a democracy centered on collective conversation and deliberation, rather than simply an atomized voting process. (Young 19) Young further argues that acknowledgment of difference and power play a central role in constructive democratic engagement. “Where there are structural inequalities of wealth and power,” she writes, “formally democratic procedures are likely to reinforce them, because privileged people are able to marginalize the voices of those less privileged.” (34)

### **Methodology**

Because I have been so deeply involved in the Swarthmore Living Wage & Democracy Campaign, I chose not to study Swarthmore. I thought that my outsider status at Pseudonym College would help me do better research in at least two major ways. First, I felt that some personal distance would help me to more dispassionately consider both praise and critique of the students labor activists’ work. Second, I felt that people would be more likely to speak with me—and to speak more openly—if they did not perceive me as a member of a deeply invested group. Nonetheless, of course, Swarthmore was the source of my interest, and I was seeking a research site similar to Swarthmore.

Pseudonym College turned out to be a near-perfect match in many respects. Like Swarthmore, Pseudonym is a small, selective, private, four-year liberal arts college in the United States. Each college enrolls under two thousand students; each was founded in the middle of the nineteenth century. Both have in recent years gone through living



wage campaigns leading to official committee processes and, ultimately, to policy changes. At the same time, I need hardly say, Pseudonym College turned out to diverge from Swarthmore in a number of ways. Most notably, Pseudonym College contracts with Unnamed Contractor for all of its janitorial and food service work, whereas Swarthmore directly employs people in these jobs.

My primary body of data consists of transcripts of interviews I conducted with members of the Pseudonym College community during my visit to College Town in the summer of 2004. Generously funded by a Joel Dean summer research grant, I spent about one month there, during which I conducted thirty-seven interviews in person; I completed two more interviews over the phone after I returned home later in the summer. In most cases I tape-recorded the interviews as well as taking notes, and from these two sources I generated a transcript of each interview before destroying the tape. In a few cases, I did not tape-record, but only took notes, and for those interviews I have close paraphrases including a few known direct quotations, rather than exact full transcripts. In one case I tape-recorded but did not take notes, so that transcript may be less complete than the others. A few interviews took place in Spanish, and there too I am sure that I was unable to gain as full an appreciation of all that was said as I might have in English. In all I conducted 39 interviews, including 6 interviews with students and alumni, 7 interviews with employees of college contractors, 7 with non-exempt staff members of the college, 10 with exempt staff members of the college, 5 with members of the college's senior administration, and 5 with members of the faculty. A few interviews involved more than one interviewee, so in total I spoke with 46 people, including 6 students and alumni, 12 employees of college contractors, 7 non-exempt staff, 10 exempt

staff, 6 senior administrators, and 5 faculty members. The interviews ranged in length from just under fifteen minutes to more than two hours; the average interview was about an hour long. While I framed questions for each members of each constituency, all the interviews covered the same themes. We talked about the best and worst things about the college as a workplace; whether, how, and why the workplace had changed; the relative power of different categories of people on campus; perceptions about the student labor activists; and an appropriate role for students in college workplace issues. (The full interview guides I created and used are reproduced in Appendix A.)

I found most of my interviewees through a snowball sampling method. I arrived in College Town having made contact with no one there except for the Institutional Review Board and the woman with whom I would be sharing an apartment. I began by emailing people whose names had been suggested to me by these people and by Swarthmore students who had been in contact with activists at Pseudonym. I asked each interviewee for suggestions of others I should talk to, and continued to follow up on these suggestions. At first I emailed everyone whose name was recommended to me. Later on in the month, as I noticed that I had plenty of interviewees in certain groups and not enough in others, I began to follow up with people in less well-represented constituency groups. When I heard people's names over and over from various sources, I pursued them more assiduously, with phone calls and repeated emails. I also contacted people whose names I came across in non-interview research, such as people listed on the website of the fair labor group.

As the month wore on, I came to see that my methodology was shaping my distribution. Among the first half of my interviews, administrators and exempt staff are

disproportionately represented, and there are no interviews at all with contract employees—those who work for Unnamed Contractor doing food service or custodial work at the college. I realized that my method of reaching potential interviewees through email and telephone was structured to be most convenient for people with desk jobs. Even had I known how to contact them, I had received very few names of contract employees. I had no problem getting other people I spoke with—administrators, exempt staff members, non-exempt staff members, and students—to suggest potential interviewees in most of the other categories, not just their own. However, almost no one seemed to know contract workers whom they would recommend I interview.

This was data in itself, of course, but nonetheless, I wanted to speak with some members of the contracted workforce. In consultation with the Institutional Review Board, I created a flyer describing the project, soliciting interview participants, and offering to treat them to coffee. (Versions of the flyer in both English and Spanish may be found in Appendix B.) I tried to post this at the entrance to the dining hall, but an employee told me that Unnamed Contractor had a policy against flyers of this kind. I did manage to pin a number of flyers to public bulletin boards, and tape them to walls and doors, in public buildings around campus, and I noticed some of the tear-off slips taken on some of them. However, I only received a few calls and emails in response to the flyers, and all were from students, not contract employees. By this time, barely a week remained in my visit to Pseudonym. If I wanted to speak with contract employees, I was going to have to approach them in person.

My reluctance to ask people in person about interviews was twofold. First, I am a shy person. When I must make the first contact with someone I do not know, I would

infinitely prefer to do it over email, where I can worry the wording to perfection, then press “send” and know that the reply is out of my hands. Even calling strangers on the telephone usually makes me nervous and requires rehearsal. Though walking right up to people was a very intimidating prospect, my determination to do good research trumped my fear.

But a second, more serious concern had kept me from making direct contacts thus far. I had heard mixed reports about Unnamed Contractor’s character as an employer. There was no way to be sure whether an employee might be reprimanded for talking to me. I had hoped to avoid the risk to employees by arranging interviews to take place outside of work; the flyers would let potential interviewees know how to contact me from the privacy of their homes. If, instead, I approached people on the job, I would be taking the risk of being spotted by supervisors. Especially with dining services workers, who were consolidated in a few centralized locations and open to supervisors’ observations, I could neither be sure of being discreet nor of avoiding a supervisor when I hoped to approach a worker.

I decided to take the risk and proceed as carefully as possible. I felt that the total absence of perspectives of contract workers would make my research significantly less useful. I reasoned that employees could always rebuff my overtures if they chose or if they were suddenly hassled by supervisors, so my actions would be unlikely to endanger people’s work situations without their consent. Still, I cautioned myself to approach these interactions with a particular openness—leaving room for people to say no or to let me know how the process could be safest and most convenient for them. I did try slipping a note to a member of the dining services staff, but this only led to an awkward,

confusing interaction (for both of us both, I think). After that I spent some reconnaissance time in campus dining spaces, nursing a snack and lingering over a newspaper while I tried to figure out who were supervisors and when would be the best moments to approach people. I felt vindicated in my caution when I ultimately did speak with some people, both in dining services and in custodial work, who, while consenting to talk with me, told me they felt their supervisors would be nonplussed to learn of the interviews.

I also learned, when I did speak with Unnamed Contractor workers, that the ways I had laid out the interview process itself tended not to be convenient for them. For instance, in most of my interviews, I asked people to plan to allocate about an hour for the interview, and we generally met either in the person's private office or in a café just off campus. (This was especially true of professors, administrators, and exempt staff. Non-exempt staff and students were more likely to propose meeting in some public space on campus.) For the Unnamed Contractor workers, however, the most convenient thing seemed to be to meet in or near their work space, either during a break or just after they got off work before going home. An hour, then, was usually more than people could reasonably spare. In some cases, too, people wanted to meet with me in groups rather than one on one. I had designed my questions to gradually lead into a long and somewhat free-ranging one-on-one conversation, and the success of my approach often seemed to depend in part on developing a certain rapport of trust over the course of the interview. Dealing with various other contingencies—having only fifteen minutes to talk, talking with a whole group at once, struggling to communicate and comprehend through my imperfect Spanish, or doing the interview in a space where it seemed possible the boss

might turn up at any moment—I sometimes felt that a different set of questions would have been more appropriate. I did modify my interview guide somewhat in the field, but if I were to do this project again, I would redesign the interviews, with an eye towards how the arc of the interview could most productively flow in different kinds of circumstances.

Perhaps most urgently, in any future work I would certainly want to shorten and clarify the consent form. The form I composed fills most of a page, including two paragraphs describing the project and a lengthy prose section about risks and rights, in which I followed almost verbatim the example offered by the Institutional Review Board. (The consent form I used, in both a Spanish and an English version, is included in Appendix C.) Some participants seemed unconcerned, even amused, by the form—especially those, like professors and administrators, who I suspect often have to skim wordy text as part of their jobs. However, a number of participants took the time to read it carefully, and sometimes it seemed to me that people found parts of the form hard to understand. In one case, I was unable to conduct an interview with an Unnamed Contractor employee who said they would have been willing to speak with me, but did not want to sign the form without reading and comprehending it carefully, and did not have time to finish that step before having to return to work. I wished I had made the form much more succinct and user-friendly—in bulleted points, for instance, rather than in blocks of text.

These interviews, then, comprise the bulk of my data. While in College Town, I also made daily field notes of observations, methodological developments, and ideas for analysis. I found and photocopied a number of relevant newspaper articles from the

history of the Pseudonym Fair Labor Campaign, and I also collected copies of various related documents from various interviewees. All these texts form parts of the body of data as well.

As with any research project, my methodology establishes bounds to what I have learned in this study. While I strove to include members of as many major campus constituencies as possible, my sample was one of convenience, and indeed I sought out participants with particular involvement or interest in campus labor issues and student activism. I did not seek to interview a representative sample of the campus as a whole. Further, my questions and interviewing strategies turned out to be a better fit with some groups than with others; specifically, for a variety of reasons, I feel more confident about the validity of data in cases where I felt I established a genuine rapport with interviewees during the course of the interview. I know that my subject position also functioned as both an asset and a limitation to my understanding of each of my interactions. I believe that almost everyone perceived me as a student, and while I tried to stress my outsider status, many probably suspected by virtue of my identity—and my interest in the case—that I must be sympathetic to the student activists at Pseudonym. I did, in fact, find myself frequently drawing parallels to the Swarthmore situation, although I think my identification with the students sometimes led me to be especially critical of them. Certainly I tended to frame questions around the issues with which I was familiar—and no doubt this sometimes aided, and sometimes limited, my comprehension.

Probably the greatest structural limitation to the project is a temporal one. Although I set out to learn about change over time in the power dynamics of the college, my entire study took place after the fact of the student-led campaign at Pseudonym

College. Had I conducted similar interviews before and during the fair labor process, as well as after, I could have investigated change over time. Since this was impossible, and all my interviews instead took place at roughly the same moment in the timeline, these data do not really allow me to analyze change at the college, but only to examine people's perceptions of change.

That said, I found the work exciting and fruitful. My research participants were generous with their time, and quick to engage thoughtfully with questions of how power and change operated in the college community. I entered the project laden with apprehensions about talking with people about potentially delicate workplace issues, but in general I was surprised to find people willing to speak about and interpret their work experiences. I wondered at the origins of my own hesitation. I suspect that I am not alone in my awkwardness, my sense of lacking the vocabulary to speak across divides of difference about work, power, and class. Among the most hopeful aspects of the nationwide campus living wage movement is its potential, in local contexts, to begin to broach these topics and breach these divides.

### **Road map**

I have chosen to organize this thesis thematically. In Chapter 2, I examine changing conceptions of what kind of an institution Pseudonym College is. I encountered the College in the midst of a number of specific transitions, some of which reflect broader processes of change in American society in general and the realm of higher education in particular. In particular, the twin projects of democratization and corporatization—which, I will argue, operate sometimes in tandem and sometimes in opposition to one another—raise fundamental questions about the purpose, character, and responsibilities



of a college. I consider some ways that various constituencies conceive of the college in its various social roles—as workplace; as socially-minded organization; as academic institution; and as self-contained local community.

Chapter 3 focuses on the various college constituencies themselves and how different people articulated their power and status relative to one another. Over and over, I heard the words “class,” “caste,” and “hierarchy,” but different accounts weighed the relations among groups differently. I pay particular attention to the contentious positioning of three constituencies whose roles, for different reasons, are liminal or ambiguous: administrative staff, the employees of Unnamed Contractor, and students. I not only consider the ordering of the hierarchy, but the real modes through which these power relations are acted out, including the key currencies of time, space, and voice.

Chapter 4 deals with ways of talking about compensation and what it signifies. I examine the competing ideologies of the market and of the living wage movement, and potentially limiting aspects of these discourses. I consider and categorize the criteria that people invoked when talking to me about standards for establishing fair wage levels, and I reflect upon what it can mean deliberately to set out to pay wages according to a different system of values than the society one inhabits.

Chapter 5 deals directly with the student-led Fair Labor campaign, covering its ideology, structure, activities, strengths and weaknesses. I focus not only on how student activists described it, but also on how others talked about it, about the students themselves and about the role of students in campus workplace issues. In particular I dwell on questions of power, centering on the question of how students use of their own privilege may undermine or re-inscribe the hierarchies of the institution.

Chapter 6 focuses on democratization. I analyze different conceptions of what it means to have a voice in one's own workplace. I highlight three aspects of voice in the college context—being at the table, feeling free to speak, and having your voice count—and show how mechanisms of unequal exclusion operate at each level.

In Chapter 7, my concluding essay, I seek to draw together analyses from the entire thesis to show the ideological and social context into which we students—mayflies in the time scale of the college—enter. I describe some of the choices available to student labor activists in their organizing, and I try to highlight what is at stake in those choices, how students' framings and tactics might bear on the discourses already at work. My wish is for this thesis to help provoke a critical and long overdue conversation—among scholars and activists and college community members all, but most especially between student activists and campus workers—about what shared analysis and collective goals should shape the campus living wage movement.

### **A note on terminology**

Some of the prevailing terms used to identify constituencies at the college are in transition or used differently by different speakers, making it difficult for me to find ways to describe the positionings of research participants in ways that are simultaneously respectful, confidential, consistent, and clear. Most salient, the general category of staff at the college has for some time been divided into two major categories: “administrative staff” (sometimes just called “administrators”) and “support staff” (occasionally just called “staff,” though this term more usually includes both categories together). The distinction is loosely one of socioeconomic class, in the sense that administrative staff positions are higher-status, tend to be professional desk jobs or supervisory positions, and

are more likely to require higher educational credentials, whereas support staff positions include grounds and maintenance kinds of jobs as well as clerical jobs, and are generally lower-status. The distinction is not always coherent or clear, however, and indeed some people told me that some categorizations were counterintuitive.

During the summer when I was there, an official statement had just gone out that these categories were being abolished in favor of the single category of “staff,” now to be differentiated only by the legal categories of “exempt” and “non-exempt,” which describe people’s eligibility for overtime. The two systems of categorization produced almost the same groups—that is, most exempt employees were administrative staff, and all (I believe) non-exempt employees were support staff—but prior to the change a small anomalous class of exempt support staff, had emerged. (One person estimated their number to be about thirty.) I believe, although I am not positive, that this group corresponds to the new job category of “professional staff” that the college considered adding between administrative and support staff, before deciding to drop that categorization system altogether in favor of exempt and non-exempt staff. (It should also be noted that some people describe themselves or others as “professionals” in the word’s more common, adjectival sense, rather than in reference to this never-realized job categorization.) Since most people I spoke with saw the shift in terminology as positive, I have tried out of respect to use the labels “exempt staff” and “non-exempt staff” in most cases, but I occasionally resort to the old labels of “administrative staff” and “support staff” where it seemed more clear. Many of the people I interviewed, however, while expressing support for the change, in fact used the old terminology in our conversations, so these terms are present in many direct quotations in the thesis.

One final source of confusion is the category that I sometimes refer to as “senior administration” or “senior staff.” People rarely spoke of this constituency at all, but when I said “the administration”—which is what we would most commonly call this constituency at Swarthmore—they generally seemed to understand that I meant the body of President and Vice Presidents, deans, directors of Human Resources and other high-level administrators, as distinct from the bigger category of “administrative staff.” The official term at Pseudonym College, I believe, was “senior staff,” however, as I no longer have access to a Pseudonym College directory, I fear that I may occasionally have assigned people to the category of senior administration—based on my own Swarthmore-based sense of who comprises the college administration—who might not in fact be officially classified that way.

#### **A note on confidentiality**

For the sake of confidentiality, I use pseudonyms whenever it is necessary to refer to specific actors at the college. I have devised false names for the college, the town, the state, the campaign, and the corporate contractor, although I also warned each person I interviewed that the identity of the college would probably be decipherable to knowledgeable readers. In Brechtian fashion, I have in many cases chosen whimsically self-referential names—to remind readers of the artifice and thereby of the subjectivity of my analysis, and also for the joy of play.