

Prepared Opening Statement

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Chairman Roe, Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Andrews, Ranking Member Hinojosa and Subcommittee Members, thank you for your invitation to participate in this hearing. It is an honor to appear before you today.

My name is Peter Weber. I am Professor of Chemistry and Dean of the Graduate School at Brown University. As the senior academic officer of Brown's Graduate School, I am responsible for assuring Brown's standards in the delivery of graduate education, for guiding the school's growth, and for identifying ways to recruit the strongest students as Brown expands and strengthens its nationally recognized graduate programs. I am quite certain that defining Brown's graduate students as "employees" would damage the fabric of graduate education at Brown University and institutions like it.

I believe that it is both shortsighted and naïve to suggest that students whose academic program requires teaching and research as a condition for the receipt of the Ph.D can be regarded as employees without destroying the educational model that has shaped Brown and so many other private institutions of higher learning. Our current educational model has made American universities global leaders in education, attracting students from around the world.

Let me tell you about Brown University, where I have taught since 1989. Brown has 51 Ph.D. programs and awards some 200 Doctor of Philosophy degrees annually. A Brown Ph.D. education prepares graduate students for careers as academicians and researchers and, more generally, as highly trained experts in all manner of fields. The Ph.D. curricula and degree requirements are established individually by the faculty leading each graduate program and take into consideration disciplinary customs and developments.

Central to all fields is the preparation of a dissertation, a written account of novel scholarship produced by the candidate. Additionally, teaching is an integral requirement in virtually every degree program, for several reasons. First, many of our doctoral students study for academic careers, where teaching will be part of their professional lives. Learning to teach as a doctoral candidate prepares the students for these academic careers. Secondly, teaching belongs to the so-called transferrable skills, that is, skills that are of value in many professional careers within and outside of academia. Third, research has shown that graduate students who train in teaching enhance their research skills. For all these reasons, training in teaching is an important and integral aspect of Brown's doctoral education.

The training is done as the students assist professors teaching courses at Brown. In limited instances, students receive the honor of being appointed as a teaching fellow, which enables them to design and teach their own course, the syllabus of which is developed in close consultation with a faculty advisor. Teaching is so critical to the graduate education curriculum that it is considered equivalent to a course. If a student fails to perform adequately in his or her teaching role, the student can be terminated from the Ph.D. program itself. Therefore, if a graduate student ordinarily would take four courses in a semester, he or she would take only three if serving as a teaching assistant. If a student fails to perform adequately in his or her teaching role, the student can be terminated from the Ph.D. program itself.

Similarly, training in research happens in Brown laboratories and offices as graduate students pursue the discovery of knowledge alongside faculty mentors. Doctoral students may also be appointed as fellows or proctors. During a fellowship semester, students devote themselves fully to their course studies or to the preparation of a thesis. A proctorship is defined to be a non-instructional, academic position intended to foster the professional development of graduate students. These can include, for example, helping to edit academic journals, curating museum exhibitions, or developing programs in the student's area of academic specialization. Like teaching and research assistantships, all proctorship positions are part of the academic training of doctoral students.

Candidates who are enrolled in Ph.D. programs at Brown receive a guarantee for five years of financial support, which includes a stipend, tuition remission, health insurance and fees. Doctoral students also receive financial support for four summers during their studies. While the exact level of the stipends varies from program to program, most programs exceed the support level specified by the Graduate School. The stipend is the same for all students enrolled in a program, and does not vary if the student exclusively takes courses while on a fellowship, or serves as a research assistant, a teaching assistant or as a proctor. There is no line designated "salary" in the student support budget of the Graduate School.

At Brown, we do not consider teaching, research or proctorships to be "jobs." That concept is so foreign to our academic mission that characterizing our Ph.D. candidates as "employees" would irrevocably alter the essence of our programs. Graduate students do not apply for a job at Brown; they apply for admission as students. Teaching experience is not usually an important criterion for admission, as preference is given to academic performance during the undergraduate studies. Once admitted, students receive training in research and teaching as part of their academic experience.

Let us examine the difference between the academic nature of our teaching assistantship program and an alternative, cost-driven approach to undergraduate instruction. If Brown wanted to staff courses with individuals who already possess a Ph.D., it could do so for a small fraction of the cost of graduate students on teaching assistantships. In other words, we could engage fully-trained adjunct faculty to satisfy

Brown's teaching needs for a fraction of the cost of our graduate student financial aid program, if our goal were merely to "purchase" instructional services. But that is not our goal. Instead, we wish to provide our Ph.D. candidates the opportunity to learn the art of teaching as part of their doctoral education.

Indeed, from a purely economic and employment point of view, it would be rational for us to assign our most experienced doctoral students – those, say, in the seventh year of study – to serve as teaching assistants. But we do not. Why? Again, our goal is the training and professional development of our doctoral candidates. Learning how to teach is one of many aspects of professional development that is completed within the timeframe recommended for completion of the doctoral degree, which of course varies by discipline. We do not seek to retain experienced teaching assistants for employment purposes. Instead, we wish to confer degrees upon successful completion of the academic requirements, which include learning how to teach.

This approach to doctoral training is costly to Brown, but it is enormously beneficial to all our students: our undergraduate students benefit from enthusiastic assistants who care deeply about their academic fields; and the doctoral students receive mentorship from their faculty advisors and a preparation that enables their academic and professional careers. Brown is proud of its "university/college" model, which views teaching and research as an integrated whole for all students.

I am a scientist by profession, not a lawyer or a labor relations expert. I do not know much about the National Labor Relations Act or about the "duty to bargain." What I do know is that in private universities such as Brown, engaging in collective bargaining about issues at the core of the academic curriculum would wreak havoc with academic freedom. It makes no sense for a university like Brown to have to bargain over the "terms and conditions" of service by students who teach, research or serve as proctors as an integral part of their academic training. Are we to bargain about course selection? Course content? Course length? The number of exams or papers in a course? The year in which a student serves as an assistant? The decision whether to assign a student a teaching, research, or proctorship role, as opposed to strictly taking courses? What if a student performs poorly as a teaching assistant? Are we to bargain over the "just cause" for the discipline imposed?

These issues are not mere speculation. They are very legitimate concerns when one contemplates the notion that a curriculum may be transformed into a "job" merely because that curriculum requires students to learn how to teach and engage in academic research. For these reasons, I respectfully oppose the prospect of calling students "employees" in Ph.D. programs such as the ones at Brown University.

This concludes my prepared testimony. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to share my opinions with you and I am looking forward to any questions Members of the Subcommittee may have.