Amidst worsening precarity exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, this article analyzes my employment crisis to highlight the critical value of communication in solidarity efforts. My case is set in U.S. academia, where graduate assistant labor is increasingly necessary for universities to function (Kroeger, McNicholas, Wilpert, & Wolfe, 2018, January 11). However, due to their student–worker identity, graduate assistants are also vulnerable to job loss amidst contestations around their employee status and rights to unionize and collectively bargain (McNicholas, Poydock, & Wolfe, 2019, December 19). Accounting for one-third of graduate assistants (McNicholas et al., 2019, December 19), international students also face unique vulnerabilities tied to travel, citizenship, and work restrictions. These precarities surfaced during the pandemic when the United States closed borders and universities furloughed graduate assistants sheltering abroad (e.g., Redden, 2020, August 11). My experience illuminates broader job insecurities and inequalities in higher education while also drawing attention to the role of communication in solidarity efforts aimed at combatting injustices. I illustrate how communication facilitated solidarity through information exchange, action coordination, transparency mobilization, and emotional connection.

Resisting employment restrictions on graduate students abroad

On 21 July 2020, my university announced employment restrictions jeopardizing my graduate education. Sent out to department leaders via email, the policy declared that graduate students must be physically present in the United States by 10 August 2020 to maintain their teaching or research assistantships. My department chair forwarded the emails to me while I was designing my fall courses from
abroad. I was in China, my home country, on a research fellowship. This new policy caused great anxiety as travel bans and visa restrictions prevented me from returning to the United States. After my arrival in China in January 2020, COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan. In February 2020, the United States imposed travel bans on foreign travelers from China, who would have to stay in a third country for at least 14 days to gain entrance; it also suspended regular visa services in China. My student visa expired in early July 2020; I remain unable to renew it. My department requested an employment exemption and a non-service stipend for me, however, the administration declined the exemption and terminated my employment on 31 July 2020. As a result, I lost my stipends, tuition remission, and health insurance. The short notice brought overwhelming stress, worsened by my financial responsibility for a dependent. As a noncitizen, I was not eligible for U.S. federal student funds. Unable to pay out of pocket for the high costs of continuing, I applied for a leave of absence.

Amidst the harmful effects of the university policy, multiple groups mobilized through acts of solidarity. A colleague also affected by the policy kept in close touch with me throughout our employment crisis. We furiously inquired about resources from various administrative units and exchanged information. My colleague identified a tuition award through unofficial channels and updated me, and we each obtained the award just in time to withdraw or terminate our leave-of-absence applications. After hearing about our situation, colleagues in our department reached out to us to offer support. We had several private Zoom meetings to share information and brainstorm strategies. In our department’s faculty meetings and university-level graduate student government meetings, our colleagues highlighted our difficulty and demanded university assistance. Another colleague wrote an op-ed in the university’s student-run newspaper to shame and draw attention to the employment restrictions. Allies beyond our department also advocated for us. The graduate student chapter in our town’s worker union issued a statement on Facebook denouncing the policy. Student journalists collected testimonies from affected students and published a news report compellingly illuminating how the employment restrictions harmed our education, finance, and mental health. Several months of public contestations prompted the university administration to attend a panel on international graduate education hosted by the graduate student government in October 2020. In this campus-wide meeting, administrators explained policy rationales and introduced remedial strategies. While maintaining employment restrictions, the university allowed for non-service stipends. A month later, my department announced a tuition award and a non-service stipend that would allow me to remain enrolled without assistantships in spring 2021.

Precarity, inequality, and communication-facilitated solidarity

My experience of being furloughed indicates job precarity in higher education, particularly among international graduate assistants. Citing financial burdens caused
by tax complications and legal risks related to export control, my university, among many others, furloughed graduate assistants overseas. Administrators formulated this policy without consulting graduate assistants and enforced it immediately. Their absolute power in deciding graduate assistants’ livelihood demonstrates graduate assistants’ marginality as university laborers. Our precarity was also due to an inability to collectively bargain, which is prohibited in our state.

My case also reveals citizenship-related inequalities in and beyond academia (Cruz, McDonald, Broadfoot, Chuang, & Ganesh, 2020). While targeting all graduate students overseas, the employment restrictions primarily affected those with foreign status like me. I was subject to travel bans and visa regulations as well as citizenship restrictions for receiving U.S. federal assistance. I could not seek jobs from other U.S. employers as U.S. law prohibits international students’ off-campus employment unless it is course-related. Additionally, international students’ tuition remains expensive throughout their program, unlike their U.S. peers who are eligible for the lower in-state tuition after one year of residence.

My employment crisis further illuminates how communication facilitated solidarity acts through information exchange, action coordination, transparency mobilization, and emotional connection (Pasquier & Wood, 2018, July 11). First, information exchange promoted resource sharing and allowed concerned parties to gain in-depth knowledge of victims’ struggles. For example, seeking and sharing information via email helped my colleague and me identify and obtain the tuition award for fall 2020. Zoom meetings with our colleagues helped them better understand our hardship and needs.

Second, stakeholders could coordinate action using different communication platforms that suited their distinct needs and capacities. For instance, my colleague and I chose closed meetings to collaborate on contestation strategies because we feared potential university retaliation and immigration ramifications due to our noncitizen status. Contrarily, our American colleagues were less concerned with open contestations. They leveraged their leadership positions in student associations to speak up in department-level and university-level meetings.

A third aspect of communication’s capacity relates to the mobilization of transparency to challenge powerful actors, a practice termed resistant transparency (Südkamp & Dempsey, 2021). As the employment restrictions were only communicated via email to department leaders and affected students, stakeholders endeavored to make the policy transparent to the public and utilized communication platforms, such as Facebook and the newspaper. I also documented the email notices and shared them with student journalists. These acts brought broader attention to the policy and pressured the university to remedy harms.

The final and equally important function of communication involved emotional connection. Amidst stress and anxiety in this disturbing situation, my colleague and I maintained personal communication to provide each other company and
emotional comfort. Communicating with allies in and beyond my department also made me aware of their care for me. Similarly, I felt moved by a message from my former colleague, who reached out to offer financial assistance upon viewing my story on Facebook. While I did not accept their offer, their desire to support me warmed my heart. All these communicative acts improved my mental wellness and fostered emotional bonding among concerned parties.

Altogether, my analysis demonstrates how solidarity was facilitated by affordances of different communication platforms. The solidarity practices built up significant resources to ameliorate my hardship caused by interlocking constraints on graduate students, foreigners, Chinese nationals, and people with dependents. Overall, my employment crisis illustrates that while COVID-19 exacerbates employment precarity and inequality in higher education, it also presents an opportunity to develop care and solidarity through communication. My experience provides a glimpse into only some of the enduring precarities and insecurities within higher education, indicating the need for further insight into the role of communication and solidarity within and beyond the academy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author appreciates comments from Sarah Dempsey and the writing coaches at UNC-Chapel Hill’s Writing Center who read the previous drafts. The author also thanks the anonymous reviewers and editor for their constructive feedback.

Funding

The author declares no funding for this article.

Conflict of Interest: This article addresses the author’s employment experience. The author reports that she had been employed by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill that may be affected by this article.

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