**PAYING FOR MY OWN LABOR**

**Bella Bennett**

I saw the bright yellow envelope tucked beneath my windshield wiper and my heart sank. Why did the university have to make the color of sunshine into a symbol of financial hardship? Leaving the ticket where it was, I grabbed the suitcase from the trunk and hauled it back the way I’d come, looking forward to handing it off to the new faculty candidate and marking the end of their visit. Now, I thought, I’d finally have a moment to focus on my severely neglected research before the next candidate arrived.

During the second year of my PhD, I was given the opportunity to serve on a faculty search committee as one of two graduate student members. The committee was made up of faculty members I respected, so I was honored that they’d selected me, and excited to work with them in this capacity. I was told it would be “a lot of reading but a good experience and some fancy dinners.”

I could have declined the offer, but I rarely say no to new opportunities. I’m both a people pleaser and curious about how people and systems work, so this was an especially alluring offer. Unfortunately, it was a much larger time commitment than I’d expected.

It started off great. The faculty leading the search designed our process using all the current best-practices in hiring, and I was proud to be part of such a well thought out process. I was also excited to learn about the pool of applicants and meet new people across a wide range of fields.

In the first stage, we read more than 40 applications and the associated 40-100 page CVs, evaluating each across an extensive metric. It took weeks. We deliberated in several committee meetings and ultimately selected a pool to interview virtually. Around this time, I received two grants to fund a project I’d initiated several months before. This was the first time I’d ever written a grant, so I hadn’t expected the project to be funded, let alone by two agencies. I’d landed the opportunity of a lifetime, and I was very worried that my commitment to the search meant that I couldn’t give it the time and energy it deserved.

I told my partner not to expect to see much of me for the coming months, much less have any help around the house, and existed as a worker. I stopped responding to calls from friends and family and focused exclusively on these two projects. Despite the mounting pressure of my workload, I didn’t see a way to dial back my efforts on the search. I felt I owed it to my mentors on the committee as much as to the great pool of candidates to see the search through.

So, I did see it through. When we brought the top candidates to campus, I met each candidate, drove them to and from their lodging, shared a meal or two with each, introduced them to the university community before their guest lectures. During two of those lectures, I acquired university parking tickets. In retrospect, I should’ve marched into the department office and asked for a parking pass - and gas compensation - but at the time I was thinking about the experience as a prestigious opportunity with some minor costs associated, so it didn’t occur to me to advocate for myself. I figured I just had to do my part and accept the consequences.

At the end of the day, I reunited the visiting faculty candidate with their suitcase and pulled the ticket off the windshield. Another $25.00 of my mostly-livable graduate salary going back to the university. I got into the car and opened the glove box, removing its twin from the week before. I paid the fines and vowed to save leftovers from the next committee dinner to help offset the loss.

Sometime after the search committee handed off our final report to the university, I mentioned my role in this process to a mentor at another institution. She asked how the university compensated me and the other graduate student on the committee. I said something about food and experience. Over the zoom screen, she looked sadly understanding. She told me that she had arranged for students to be compensated for any type of organized service to her department.

I can’t stop thinking about how much of a difference it would have meant to me to have been compensated for this immense amount of work. Graduate student exploitation is so common that I never questioned whether this should have been a compensated role until my mentor brought it up. I don’t think it occurred to anyone at my institution either.

A few days later, I received a department email recognizing me for my hard work on the committee. The department had set aside a $25.00 gift card to the university coffee shop as a show of their gratitude. At the time, I was grateful for any recognition. Now, I’m disappointed.

How much money did the university spend on this faculty search? Tens of thousands of dollars, probably. They wanted to get it right, and they allocated the appropriate funds to do so. Faculty at our institution are obligated to spend some percentage of their time on service to the university, so the faculty on the committee were compensated in that way. The only oversight, as tends to be the case, was paying the grad students for our time. This isn’t a dig at my university, it’s a call to action for all institutions perpetuating this exploitation. The expectation should never be that experience and a line on your resume – and perhaps a $25.00 gift certificate - are fair compensation. I spent over 200 hours on this search, and while it was a good learning experience, it cost me a lot more than the parking tickets. Compensation could’ve meant that I at least broken even.

You will never again catch me saying yes to uncompensated labor, no matter how much of an important experience it might offer. Perhaps if we stop allowing these systems to take advantage of us, they’ll have to find another way to incentivize us to do this work – like for instance, fair payment. In the meantime, I hope that more faculty members rise to the occasion as my mentor did, and build compensation into any form of student service to a university or institution of higher education.