



Can Grad Students Unionize? Academia Awaits Major Labor Board Ruling

News

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The article, "Can Grad Students Unionize? Academia Awaits Major Labor Board Ruling," featured in the *Chicago Tribune*, discussed how the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) is expected to issue a major ruling, any day now, on whether Columbia University graduate students are employees with a right to unionize, which would have implications for top-tier universities throughout the country.

Joe Ambash weighed in on the case.

Joe, who represented Brown University in the 2004 ruling that the NLRB could overturn, said deeming grad students as employees "is fraught with confusion and tremendous difficulties."

"We could have a sea change in private sector graduate education if it is decided that research assistants are employees," Joe said.

Calling students employees and allowing them to bargain disrupts the educational nature of the arrangement and raises concerns about what is up for negotiation, including academic decisions, Joe stated. Could they bargain about curriculum? About course length? About standards for graduating? The National Labor Relations Act doesn't set any limits, and it is unclear if the board will do so in its ruling, Joe said.

Even if the bargaining focused on wages and working conditions, to call work done as part of a dissertation requirement a job is, he said, "ridiculous."

"Students spend all night long in the lab (as research assistants)," Joe said. "Now they're going to bargain about how many hours they work?" He filed an amicus brief asking the NLRB to uphold the Brown University decision on behalf of nine elite schools, including Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Cornell and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

To read the full article, please visit the [*Chicago Tribune*](#).

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Related People



Joseph W. Ambash

Partner

617.532.9320

Email