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## IWS briefing, Summer 2008 Volume 8 Issue 2

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## IWS briefing, Summer 2008 Volume 8 Issue 2

### **Abstract**

[Excerpt] A newsletter on workplace issues and research from the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University.

### **Keywords**

ILR, Institute for Workplace Studies, IWS, alumni, curriculum, Joseph Zappala, George Boyer

### **Comments**

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## Revised Curriculum Adds More Flexibility

Three years into the revised undergraduate curriculum and both students and faculty are still adjusting to the change. The number of credits needed to graduate remains at 120, but students can now satisfy that requirement with fewer courses and more electives. Several professors have started team-teaching new courses or testing out new course structures and some are teaching advanced writing as part of substantive ILR courses.

"The students seem to be happier," says George Boyer, who was co-chair of the ad hoc committee that developed the new curriculum and is a professor of labor economics and chair of the Teaching Advisory Committee. But he acknowledges unease in certain quarters. "Some freshmen and sophomores are worried there are too few ILR required courses to fill up their schedules," Prof. Boyer says. "Although there are plenty of electives to choose from, a number of undergrads want a schedule given to them."

That said, the majority are taking advantage of the added degrees of freedom the new curriculum offers. Students now have time for serious language study—almost a requirement for any aspiring professional with an interest in the global economy. More students are taking at least one semester abroad and/or pursuing off-campus credit internships. Transfer students find it easier to meet all the requirements without having to sacrifice study abroad, internship opportunities, or electives. "The change is an immense benefit to transfers," Prof. Boyer says. "Even those who came after just one year had great trouble cramming it all in. Now they take at

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## New ILR Administrators Focus on Strategy in Changing Environment

STRATEGIC IS A WORD HEARD FREQUENTLY around ILR these days. That's because two recent high-level administrative appointments—one in finance/administration and one in communications—signal Dean Harry Katz's determination to strengthen the school's understanding of, and responsiveness to, changes occurring in the law and policy arenas, in the employment relationship, in the labor movement, and generally throughout the workplace.

"We're different from what we were 60 years ago, or even five or 10 years ago," says Joseph Zappala, who joined ILR last year in the newly created position of director of communications. "At the core our focus is still on real-world problems affecting the workplace. But ILR is keeping pace as the world of work changes. Now we're looking more internationally, at how organizations operate and how parties interact in a global setting."

This is an opportune moment for ILR to be polishing its strategic lens. A dedicated faculty and staff, combined with deep institutional expertise on work and employment, position the school to purposefully mold its future in an environment undergoing profound transformation. "The traditional model of higher education will change and evolve rapidly over the next decade," says Joseph Grasso (MILR'87), the new assistant dean of finance and administration, "and likely involve new, lower-cost methods of teaching young adults. ILR has so many strengths, but to take advantage of them we also need a different model of how we manage ourselves."

Although Messieurs Zappala and Grasso bring different skills and experience to their respective posts, both appreciate the importance of strategic positioning. Mr. Grasso expects ILR will become more agile in its ability to identify and pursue opportunities while making tough and informed decisions about where to invest resources. Mr. Zappala just completed most of the research he needed to begin crafting ILR's message, defining its brand, and shaping its visual identity, all in the service of burnishing the school's reputation and raising its national and international profile.

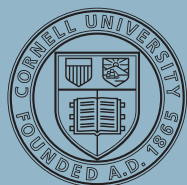
Taking a cue from the private sector, Mr. Grasso envisions ILR will embark on the academic equivalent of mergers and acquisitions. He talks about potential collaborative partnerships with think tanks, professional organizations, and other educational institutions, particularly on policy-related matters. Such arrangements might involve sharing faculty, staff, and research associates on joint projects and could prove more produc-

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*A newsletter on workplace issues and research from the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University*



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## New Administrators

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tive and financially rewarding for all involved than if the parties continued operating entirely on their own. “These groups are increasingly important and the connections should be proactively nurtured,” Mr. Grasso says. “We need to reexamine how we do things.”

One result of that self-scrutiny will likely be efforts to bridge the divide between the resident and extension sides of the house. In addition to their graduate and undergraduate teaching responsibilities, resident faculty are obliged to do original research and publish the results in peer-reviewed journals. Extension faculty are hands-on: they provide training and education to employers, unions, lawyers, and policymakers; they help organizations manage conflict and implement change; and they undertake client-focused research on workforce and economic development. Given the changes occurring in the world of work, more cross-fertilization of knowledge and expertise would enhance **ILR**’s stature and impact. “This is an opportunity for the school to position itself to be relevant and engaged in all topics affecting the workplace,” Mr. Grasso says.

Equally important is expanding the commitment to international programs and executive education. Competitive pressures from other universities and for-profit providers of training and education are pushing **ILR** Extension, in particular, to consider use of blended learning techniques, which combine short periods of face-to-face contact with more extended distance-learning arrangements. This model would make **ILR** programs more easily accessible to clients and facilitate their interaction with the full range of **ILR** activities. “We are a school of practitioners,” Mr. Grasso notes. “The more we do to support those practical applications of theory and produce research desired by the marketplace, the better off we are.”

The strategic thinking behind these and other new initiatives affects how and what Mr. Zappala communicates about

the school. Starting from the premise that much of **ILR**’s uniqueness derives from its three-fold mission of teaching, research, and outreach, Mr. Zappala concedes this distinctiveness nonetheless requires that the school tell its story in a fresh, engaging, and clear fashion. Data from focus groups and client surveys, as well as his own networking with faculty, staff, alumni, and other constituents, are guiding the evolution of a communications plan. “We have real untapped potential to explain the cool work we do and how it impacts the workplace and public policy,” he says.

Mr. Zappala’s plans are ambitious. He regards the **ILR** website as the school’s primary face to the outside world and this year will direct a complete makeover to ensure it reflects the school’s overall message and visual identity. He has been working with the communications and web development teams to add fresh content to the web-based **ILR** News Center every few days and has made daily updates the next goal. Future projects include developing a new print brochure about the whole of **ILR**, adding more multi-media to the website, exploring ways to use and benefit from the latest social media technology, and building relationships with key reporters and editors at general interest and trade publications.

In addition, Mr. Zappala will market the services of his office to other units at **ILR**. He and his associates are prepared to offer guidance and advice on marketing and communications strategy; recommend designers, writers, videographers and other vendors; and provide communications tools and resources, including an **ILR** photo archive. Mr. Zappala also expects his office to play an increasing role in ensuring consistency in message and visual identity and in maintaining quality control on key pieces aimed at external audiences.

It is too soon to forecast what the combined impact of these two strategic activists will be. But it’s a sure bet that the **ILR** of tomorrow will have a different feel and reach than the **ILR** of today. ■

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## Revised Curriculum

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most three big classes and then move into other smaller, more advanced classes.”

Students are also flocking to the new advanced writing option, which was rolled out in fall 2006 after **ILR** committed to teaching this university requirement in-house instead of relying on the English department infrastructure. “If you’re in the social sciences you should take a social science course and practice writing in that field,” Prof. Boyer explains. A major draw for the students is the small class size and the opportunity to develop a relationship with the professor, one of the realms in which **ILR** had fallen short in recent years and one of the factors that motivated the faculty to revise the curriculum and reduce the number of mega-lectures.

Faculty are generally satisfied with the streamlined and more flexible curriculum. Consolidation of course material into one semester from two eliminated several large introductory lecture courses and cleared the way for more courses in emerging fields, such as international and comparative labor. Seven-week mini-courses will begin this fall, enabling professors, visitors, and advanced graduate students to teach topics that may be relevant to current events or policy debates but which are effectively presented over shorter periods; “Employee Relations and Human Resource Management in China” will be among the first of these offerings.

Support for the full scope of change is not universal, however. Some faculty members have expressed concern about the reduced number of required statistics and labor history courses and wonder if micro and macro organizational behavior can be adequately covered in one semester instead of allocating one full semester to each topic. Also, the writing seminars are straining the faculty’s teaching capacity. The 15-student limit forces another 20-25 students, who would otherwise fill out a typical class of 35-40, to find an alternative, which translates into larger classes for other courses or a heavier teaching load for faculty.

A full evaluation of the revisions is now underway. The Teaching Advisory Committee expects to query the faculty regarding their experiences with the new curriculum. And, in addition to the new annual survey of **ILR** graduating seniors, this fall the school will host a series of focus groups—separately for seniors and juniors, and combined for sophomores and freshmen—to hear directly from students. The findings will determine whether the new curriculum needs tweaking or will stand as is.

## ILR Alums Who Walk the Labor Path

**S**TUDENTS SOMETIMES SAY the labor movement gets short shrift at ILR. There aren't enough classes on union-related topics, the story goes, or peers committed to working on labor's front lines. But a long roster of ILRies, from graduate and undergraduate programs alike, are enjoying illustrious and fulfilling careers either in the union sector itself or in government, where their portfolios include programmatic and regulatory functions that matter to workers.

Labor alumni Randi Weingarten and Bruce Raynor, president of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and general president of UNITE HERE, respectively, are perhaps the best known. But other, less heralded graduates play crucial roles in union organizing, contract negotiations, training and education, community outreach, policy analysis, legal representation, worker protection, and labor law reform. Many maintain active ties to their alma mater and also serve as conduits into the labor movement for students who choose this career path.

"It's a smaller school for labor people," says Moira Dolan (BS'86), assistant director of public policy in the research and negotiations department of District Council (DC) 37 AFSCME. "But the program has grown since I was there. Unions are also becoming more and more involved in ILR." Each year now the school hosts a Union Days event in the spring in conjunction with a social justice career fair, and the alumni association counts labor-oriented graduates among its active members. Alumni hire student interns during the summer and actively help students find fulltime labor jobs.

Regardless of their functional niche, labor alumni see their mission as advancing and protecting workers' interests. For John Amman (MS'90), a business representative for Local 600 of the International Cinematographers Guild/International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, that means negotiating and administering contracts in the context of continuous technological innovation. "Being a media union forces us to deal with certain types of change and be prepared for what lies ahead," Mr. Amman explains. "We're

putting heavy emphasis on retraining—the union took the lead in training members for the shift from film to digital—and as new job classifications arise, we look to add them to the contracts."

Ms. Dolan, a veteran researcher and policy analyst at DC 37, provides critical support for contract negotiations and outreach initiatives. Her union represents an assortment of New York City employees for whom affordable housing, workplace safety, economic security, and social justice are high-priority issues. Currently, she is enmeshed in membership education about health care reform—what it means to members as consumers and what it means to members in the health services who provide direct care. Access to affordable child care is a hot-button issue that has turned into a research project (with ILR Extension) to evaluate the effect of child care subsidies for working parents. Funding for the study comes from the New York City Council, and Ms. Dolan hopes the research will show affordable child care has a positive impact on workplace relations and economic development.

Training and educating union leaders to deal with a host of challenges—from increasingly diverse member demographics to increasing member involvement in contract negotiations—is the responsibility of Ken Margolies (BS'71), director of organizing programs at ILR Extension in New York City. He has, for example, provided activist training to Chinese home care workers belonging to Local 1199SEIU/United Healthcare Workers East and more recently worked with Extension colleagues to help the UFT and the New York State Nurses Association find a better balance between advocacy for members and excellence in service. "Traditionally the boss makes

the decision and the union is left to deal with the impact on members," Mr. Margolies says. "But now unions are involved in decisions that affect how jobs are performed. Especially in the professions, members care deeply about the product and the way it's delivered."

Labor alumni with executive-level positions in the public sector likewise care about service quality, albeit in the context of the state's ability to protect workers. Connie Varcasia (MILR'79) was deputy commissioner of workforce protection in the New York State Department of Labor (DOL) during the Pataki administration after having served as director of the state Senate's labor committee for 16 years. In that post, she helped draft amendments to child labor laws that limited the number of hours minors could work and added requirements for parental and school oversight. As deputy commissioner she implemented a new program requiring work permits for child performers and brought modern technology to the department, an improvement that enhanced the efficiency and efficacy of investigators and inspectors in the field.

Last year's change from a Republican to a Democratic administration in Albany brought a more proactive stance to worker protection. Colleen Gardner (BS'81), executive assistant for labor affairs at DOL and former director of organizing and community services at the New York State AFL-CIO, serves as liaison to the labor movement and shepherd of new initiatives, including community outreach to uncover labor law violations. Ms. Gardner says the department is also pushing for reforms that would protect employers who abide by state labor laws against the unfair advantage accruing to employers who do not. In addition, she is involved in a project about worker misclassification (as independent contractors instead of employees) that was prompted by a 2007 report, compiled by two ILR Extension faculty, concerning worker misclassification in the construction industry.

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### Labor Alumni

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One common element among this cohort of labor alumni is having grown up in a union family or falling in with a teacher or mentor who steered them towards the labor track. Ms. Varcasia's father was shop steward and president of his United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America local at General Electric; the family lived through the GE strike of 1969-70. Ms. Varcasia says, "so I had personal knowledge of the issues." Mr. Margolies' mother belonged to several different unions during her working life. Ms. Dolan was encouraged by her mother, a member of the Newspaper Guild; a high school history teacher who was chapter chair of the UFT local; and **ILR** faculty (notably George Brooks). Ms. Gardner's social studies teacher suggested **ILR** for its pre-law and Ivy League credentials but the young student quickly became an activist

and signed on for summer internships with unions. John Amman grew up in a blue-collar household, where his father was a member of the UAW; it was his Peace Corps experience in Sierra Leone, however, where he lived next to a tribal chief who had been a trade union leader for the mine workers, that sparked his commitment. (Mr. Amman recently co-wrote a book with another Peace Corps volunteer that was structured around fragments of letters from village residents to the authors during the regional wars in the 1990s.)

While some labor alumni knew where they were headed prior to enrolling, others caught the union bug as students. Regardless of the starting point, the end result often reflected a crucial lesson. Says Ms. Gardner: "We learned to understand the other side's point of view, to address the issues they bring up, and to better argue for our own." ■

**GOTO** 

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