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THE COMPOSITION ISSUE INTRODUCTION

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Over the past decade, discussions of the working conditions of writing teachers have slowly begun to move from the margins of fringe journals and conference caucuses into mainstream venues. Interestingly, even a cursory review of these discussions reveals that they rarely focus only on labor issues. The labor discussion in Composition often quickly veers into issues as varied as the continued viability of tenure; the "service" ethic and the value of pedagogy relative to scholarship; the character of Composition research; the abolition of first-year comp; the relationship between Composition and literature in English departments; and the position of Composition within academic institutions (including WAC/WID discussions and the ongoing discussion of the abolition of first-year comp). The wide scope and urgent tone of this discussion suggests a general recognition that this issue is consequential, and bears not only on the future of Composition studies, but on the way academic work is done more generally.

Ironically, the emergence of Composition as an established discipline over the past three decades has not led to improvements in the percentages of composition courses taught by contingent faculty. Most of the people who teach college writing in America are contingent laborers whose salaries and working conditions don't even come close to meeting any reasonable minimum standards for professionals. According to the recent CAW/CCCC study of part-time and non-tenure-track faculty working conditions in free-standing writing programs (programs that have separate budget lines from English departments),

- Only 7% of those who teach introductory undergraduate courses are full-time, tenure track faculty.
- Of the remaining 93%, 18% of introductory undergraduate courses are taught by full-time, non-tenure-track faculty; 33% are taught by part-time faculty, and 42% are taught by graduate teaching assistants.
- Departments that grant doctorates have the highest percentage of introductory courses taught by graduate teaching assistants (85%) with 5% of those introductory courses taught by full-time, non-tenure track faculty and 7% by part-time faculty.
- 60% of full-time non-tenure-track faculty make less than \$28,000 dollars a year.
- 21% of part-time faculty earn less than \$2,000 per course, and 60% earn less than \$3,000 per course. (Faculty earning \$3,000 per course, what some have described as "reasonable compensation," would only earn \$24,000 per year if they taught a full course load.)
- Less than half (47%) of part-time faculty paid by the course get six weeks notice of their teaching assignments.
- Only 26% of part-time faculty paid by the course receive funds to attend

- professional meetings.
- Less than half of part-time faculty paid by the course (37%), as compared to 100% of full-time, tenure-track faculty, have access to a health plan through their work.

Of course, these statistics won't shock any of the regular readers of *Workplace*, or anyone else who has been teaching college composition for long. The numbers are very consistent with other studies that have been done over the past decade.

The emerging discussion of labor issues in Composition's mainstream journals and at its most widely attended conferences is certainly long overdue. Curiously, in spite of the pervasiveness of "the labor problem" in most of our everyday lives, and the availability of mounds of statistics and published narratives that consistently present a fairly bleak picture of writing instruction as a profession, labor conditions have never moved to the forefront of Composition scholarship. We now have our own substantial theoretical foundation in Composition, and we are doing empirical research that uses increasingly sophisticated methodologies to contextualize writing and pedagogy and explore the varied factors that affect public literacies, the production of texts and classroom instruction. It is curious that the everyday working conditions of most writing instructors—basically, the material conditions within which literacy instruction occurs in post-secondary education in the U.S.—have so rarely surfaced in our research. I often marvel at the difference between the portrait of writing instruction I see in most of our scholarship and the material reality I encounter in my everyday working life. I wonder how different our discipline might look if we shined more of the light of our research on the basement offices of our contingent instructorate, and in the classes they teach.

There are myriad reasons for Composition's avoidance of its labor problems, but some of it might stem from the fact that addressing our own labor issues forces us to ask the most basic and existential of questions: "Who, or what, is Composition?" and "What are we going to do now?" Some recent approaches to these questions do the necessary work of pushing "the labor problem" to the forefront of our disciplinary conversation and ensuring that when we talk about labor issues we recognize that we work within complex, economically accountable bureaucracies. However, among the chief characteristics of the emerging conversation concerning labor in Composition is the conscious adoption of a business management rhetoric that could mark a significant shift in the discipline's general ideological orientation and change the way that we view the work of teaching and our goals as literacy educators and scholars.

The specifics of some of the management-oriented models that have recently been proposed vary, but they are generally characterized by

- The advocacy of coping tactics within externally imposed economic/institutional frameworks that they assert must inevitably define our labor structure and our pedagogical goals – frameworks whose terms and logic are often justified, rather than questioned.
- The explicit or tacit advocacy of multi-tiered labor structures that usually include a tenured class of manager-scholars who make policy and are invested in the long-term interests of the institution and an efficiently maintained and variously contingent class of worker/teachers.
- An approach to our literacy mission that often foregoes or actively disparages politically progressive or civic views of literacy and tends to view literacy education in market terms.

The participants in this conversation often explicitly self-identify as management, and articulate "the labor problem" from a management perspective. Some have recently advocated models that would maintain the same basic hierarchies that currently characterize English departments at most large, state institutions, but

include pragmatic measures that are intended to improve the pay and material working conditions of contingent teachers. Some have recently advocated measures that solidify the institutional constancy and authority of a class of professional managers, as they continue the practice of relegating large portions of the literacy workforce to a permanently subordinate status. In these models, a tenured group of managers set policies, establish curriculums, and hire, fire, and "train" an untenured teaching staff.

Some advocates of management-oriented approaches to labor in Composition have also asserted that we should no longer maintain the illusion that academia is separate from the marketplace, and they employ economic analysis and the rhetoric of business to propose models for the future that embrace market values. In a recent issue of *Writing Program Administration*, Keith Rhodes draws on "Total Quality Management" (TQM), a theoretical framework designed for analysis in business, to plot the future of Composition. According to Rhodes, the true "customers" of the "business" of Composition are America's employers, who merely use students and parents as "buying agents" (61). Compositionists would be more happy, respected, and highly paid if we focused on determining what the marketplace expects from our students and delivered it to them as expertly and efficiently as possible. Michael Murphy has also recently argued that academics are workers who produce a product; therefore we have to make sure that we are accountable to the "*education-consuming general public*" [italics mine] (18). Generally, the position is that if Composition is going to survive and prosper as a discipline we have to face facts about the future health of our own bottom line--that means finding a niche in the increasingly corporatized university.

Our labor structures and our rhetoric should be thoughtfully considered and discussed. Models that maintain the basic labor structures of a system that includes a group of permanent and secure managers who oversee a subordinate and variously situated staff could serve to further separate teaching work from the work of scholarship and administration. For instance, there are many potential differences between the "training" and the "education" of new teachers. The term "education" suggests the possibility of individual growth and development, of challenging questions and diverse, perhaps even contradictory, pedagogies. In contrast, "training," a term one encounters regularly in writing management discussions, suggests the top-down implementation of standard management policies and pedagogies. Trainees can be required to share the pedagogical/ideological orientation of their management, to use a standard syllabus and teach required texts. What are the practices and values being disseminated by teachers who are not tenurable, do not research and may not even make basic decisions concerning the classes they teach? There is, in Composition, a still largely unexamined relationship between our labor practices and our pedagogical philosophies and practices.

Even when we have the best of intentions concerning the future of the profession, we should be wary of marketplace rhetoric and analytical paradigms that stress efficiency, product yields and the institution's bottom line. If we justify the logic of the cost-cutting measures that have been employed over the past three decades to casualize large portions of the academic labor force, we should not be surprised if product-oriented labor models lead to the same highly standardized, assessment-driven, teacher-proof curriculums that now dominate many primary and secondary school systems. From a management perspective, it will likely seem much cheaper and more efficient to plug variously qualified workers into a standardized curriculum than to hire fully credentialed, innovative and independent professionals as teachers.

We do need to make sure that we are thinking about academic work as what it is—labor. The image of the humanities academic as somehow separate from, and perhaps above, systems of economics and work has always been an illusion; and in an era in which the societal role of higher education is being radically redefined, we certainly cannot afford to cling to that image. I sense that most compositionists are acutely aware of this anyway. After all, a large percentage of the people who do Composition work also hold other part-time jobs outside of the university and hardly live the cloistered life of ivory tower intellectuals. Indeed, because the majority of literacy jobs are typical of so many other low-end jobs created in the new economy—they are unstable, offer little or no hope of advancement, and tend to alienate workers from

each other and the hierarchies through which they are managed—much of Composition's workforce are intimately familiar with economic realities. The same can be said of many of our students, who very much live in the world of contemporary wage labor. In the large, urban institutions where I have worked as an adjunct and teaching "assistant," most of my students have also been casualized workers who maintain part or full-time jobs—as package handlers, waiters, temporary clerical workers and order pickers, telemarketers, etc.—while taking classes. Moreover, even those tenured or tenure-track compositionists who have more job stability and better working conditions typically spend considerable portions of their careers as administrators trying every semester to fill first year writing sections with a hodge podge of adjuncts and graduate teaching "assistants." There was never any golden era for Composition. It emerged as a professional discipline during an era of retrenchment, expanding enrollments and shrinking state appropriations—an era in which universities have become dependent on contingent labor and increasingly on the whims of private funding.

However, recognizing our position as workers who are variously situated within large, complex and economically accountable bureaucracies leaves us with a number of different opportunities concerning the possibilities for the future of our careers, our departments and our profession. Does recognizing that academic work is paid labor mean that professional compositionists must embrace a management identity? To return to the basic questions that the labor issue raises, Who are the "we" of Composition's emerging conversation concerning labor? Does it substantially include teaching labor, or is it mainly a conversation about the management of teaching labor?

Much of the work presented in this issue will make the case that before we embrace or implement any particular labor models it is important that we not only recognize that we are workers within economic systems, we should also contextualize the current state of labor in Composition within the general economic and academic trends that America has undergone over the past three decades. A substantial body of research on professional trends in academia indicates that universities have experienced the same casualization that increasingly typifies labor throughout the American economy (see, for instance, Martin, 1998; Rhoades, 1998; Schell, 1998; Schell and Stock, 2001; Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). It is because academic work is not separate from national economic and political trends that we have to consider whether our practices as teachers and colleagues resist casualization or actually facilitate it.

The essays featured in this issue embrace our positions within economically accountable institutions and articulate "the labor problem" from a labor perspective. Rather than approaching Composition labor as a business management issue, they approach it as a labor issue and situate it within the contemporary labor movement. Our labor structures and the language we use to describe them are not ideologically neutral: they carry implicit values concerning people, literacy, authority and work. These essays highlight the fact that our individual and collective responses to our labor problem situate us ideologically and that ideology will likely have a great impact on the way that we will approach literacy, both in our scholarship and in the classroom. In "Citizenship and Literacy Work," Richard Ohmann examines the relationship between literacy instruction in higher education and general socio-political trends as he connects systems of labor with literacy education. In "Toward a New Labor Movement in Higher Education: Contingent Labor and Organizing for Change," Eileen Schell notes that progressive academic workers are looking beyond their departments and disciplines and situating themselves within local and national struggles for greater democracy and equity. Schell urges organizing and coalition-building both within and outside of academia. In "Making a Place for Labor: Composition and Unions," Bill Hendricks lauds the potential of labor unions to help remedy the problems of work in Composition. Hendricks offers both national statistics concerning unionized faculty and his own department as evidence that unionization can help faculty to build successful programs with good working conditions. Finally, James Sledd, who has worked for years to bring labor issues to the attention of the discipline, discusses the growing divide between teaching labor and management in Composition and argues for basic, structural changes in academic departments.

The issue also includes two very interesting and important colloquies on the state of labor in Composition. Tony Baker, a co-editor of this issue, mediates a discussion that includes Sharon Crowley, Walter Jacobsohn, Eric Marshall, Michael Murphy, Karen Thompson and Katherine Wills. The colloquy begins with the question of whether to abolish mandatory first-year composition, and moves on to a variety of issues, including "the service ethic," the pros and cons of management models, and the need for coalition building. Then Chris Carter leads a discussion of the interrelations of Composition Studies, Cultural Studies, and contemporary academic labor. That discussion includes Alan France, Robin Goodman, Patty Harkin, William Hendricks, Cary Nelson, Leo Parascondola, Eileen Schell, James Sosnoski and William Vaughn. Participants touch on a broad range of important issues, including disciplinary, technology, and developing a rhetoric of resistance.

Finally, Leo Parascondola, also a co-editor of this issue, discusses labor issues with Ira Shor. And Steve Parks talks with me about, among other things, his new book, *Class Politics: The Movement for the Students' Right to Their Own Language*.

Leo, Tony and I are very proud of the work we have assembled here. On the whole, we think it is a rich, thoughtful, sometimes even contradictory examination of how our labor practices are linked to our politics, our professional identities and our everyday goals as literacy educators.

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