


2018

## Terms of Time for Composition: A Materialist Examination of Contingent Faculty Labor

Jesse Priest

*New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/alra>

 Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

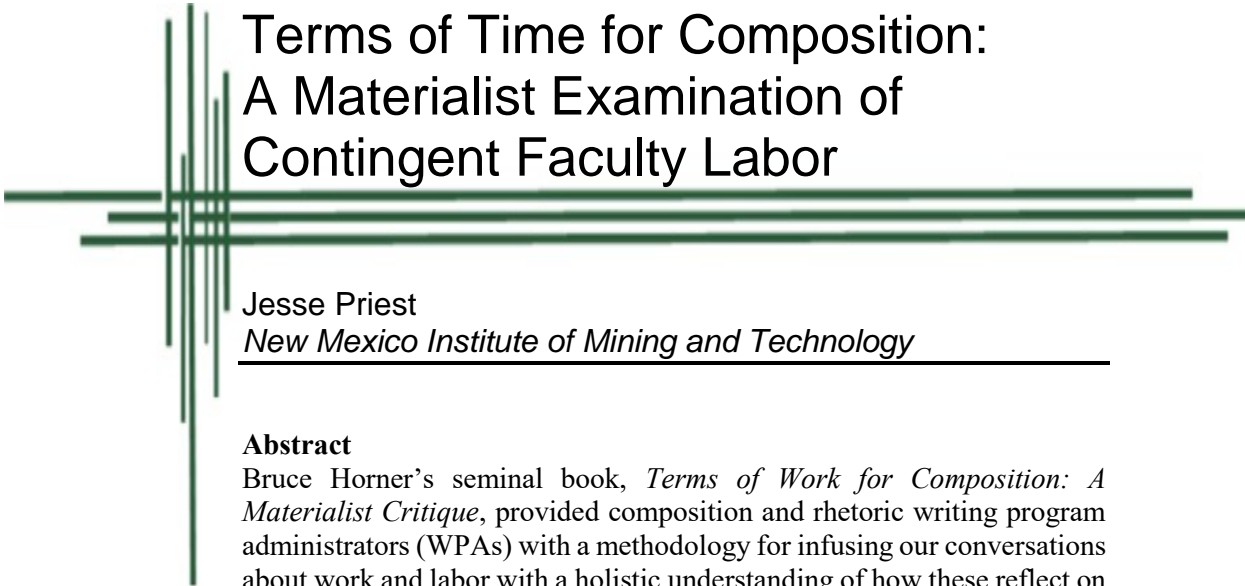
---

### Recommended Citation

Priest, Jesse (2018) "Terms of Time for Composition: A Materialist Examination of Contingent Faculty Labor," *Academic Labor: Research and Artistry*: Vol. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/alra/vol2/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Labor: Research and Artistry by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. For more information, please contact [kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu](mailto:kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu).



# Terms of Time for Composition: A Materialist Examination of Contingent Faculty Labor

Jesse Priest

*New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology*

---

## **Abstract**

Bruce Horner's seminal book, *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique*, provided composition and rhetoric writing program administrators (WPAs) with a methodology for infusing our conversations about work and labor with a holistic understanding of how these reflect on the lived experiences of students, teachers, and administrators. Drawing on empirical data, including surveys of contingent faculty at a large northeastern research university, as well as textual analysis of teaching material and an NCTE position statement, I propose the inclusion of a materialist-oriented conceptualization of time to the discussion began by Horner and others. Using the lens of how time is allocated, I argue for a wider understanding of the separations between how institutions and contingent teaching faculty (including graduate teaching assistants) view the importance of their labor and discuss implications for departmental design and philosophy.

---

Jesse Priest directs the New Mexico Tech Writing Center and teaches courses in college writing and technical communication. His research interests focus on Writing Center Studies, as well as the relationship between academic knowledge and public engagement, particularly with regard to how scientists talk to people outside of their disciplines. He is also interested in writing assessment and composition pedagogy.

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 1.2 (2018)*

**I**n the 2012 Call for Submissions for the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Program Chair Howard Tinberg bemoans that “public funding for higher education continues to decline... government initiatives have rewarded...those schools that demonstrate productivity. Progress toward learning is now measured not by achievement but by speed and mere completion.” As an important touchstone for writing program administrators and the wider discipline of composition and rhetoric, the CCCC’s Call inarguably represents an existential crisis in higher education that the field feels both directly affected by and compelled to address. Inherent to the anxiety present in the CCCC’s Call is the sense that the work we do within our field needs to be justified, or possibly re-examined. While this anxiety reflects external pressures and constraints, it also manifests itself internally within writing programs themselves. This manifestation often takes the form of departments’ growing reliance on contingent faculty labor to meet external pressures and institutional demands of course numbers, sizes, and number of students served. For the purposes of this project, I consider how contingent faculty, specifically graduate teaching assistants, view their labor and work valued by their institution with regard to their time. For my purposes, I am mostly sticking to Arendtian definitions of labor and work, where “labor” is a physical or mental action, and “work” is that action’s production within the institution. I am also drawing on Bruce Horner’s three meanings of work in composition studies, as paraphrased by Donna Strickland: “work as the workplace in which composition teaching is done; work as one’s “own” work...and work as teaching” (Bousquet et al. 46). It is my belief that we, as writing program administrators, should not take for granted our own assumptions about labor and value. By engaging in self-reflective thought and discussions about the roles of labor and value within our own administration and pedagogy, we might be better equipped to address the broader anxieties represented in Tinberg’s call and elsewhere.

### **Time, Labor, and Contingent Faculty**

The issue of considering labor and value in the field of composition and rhetoric has been addressed by Bruce Horner in his now field-canonical *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique*. I began this project with the idea of using Horner’s work as an underlying influence rather than something I was directly responding to. What I began to notice while researching, however, is that among compositionists (and especially among graduate teaching assistants) there is a concern waiting to be addressed from a materialist perspective: the issue of time. Time is inseparably connected to labor in a variety of ways: we spend time, we engage in work while also engaging in time, and our institutions, our students, and ourselves put pressure on us to mediate our time in certain and specific ways. Time, however, has not yet been acknowledged as its own issue within materialist critiques of composition and rhetoric. “Time,” for example, does not appear in the glossary of Horner’s book,

and while I believe that traditional materialist perspectives would consider time to be an aspect of labor, I argue that when considering composition pedagogy and writing program administration, time deserves to be critiqued as its own issue with its own nuanced set of concerns. Citing Giddens, Horner writes that “structural determinist and individualist tendencies remove structures from their instantiation in time, eliding their material historicity,” (xix) an approach that Horner himself acknowledges as rendering individual agency to a binaristic extreme of either inflation or ignorance. “Time-space compression,” as originally articulated by David Harvey, is no stranger to Marxist and material critiques; capitalist society compresses time and space by altering the means of communication and travel. In Horner’s terms, however, the extension continues to traditional definitions of academic discourse, which “is imagined as existing and operating discrete from, rather than in relation to and with, other material social practices” (113). Instead, Horner argues for a “mutual dependence of structure and agency” (131) with regard to university practices. This re-placement of academic discourse, and the lived experiences of those who inhabit it, demands increased attention for the value-placement of various forms of labor, and, to extend Horner’s argument: the ways in which structure and agency are not only mutually dependent but mutually influential.

Much of Horner’s analysis throughout *Terms* is easily applicable to issues currently faced by many contingent teaching faculty. Horner draws a “distinction between intellectual and non-intellectual labor, [which] denies the location of ‘mental’ labor in the material conditions of available technological and other material resources” (2). The kind of work expected by tenure-line faculty, specifically their research and teaching of self-proposed and self-designed courses, is seen as intellectual labor, as it can only possibly arise from the individual teacher herself. As Horner writes, “a course developed by the author, and so ostensibly belonging to her, carries more exchange value than a course repeatedly assigned to her by an institution” (5). Contingent faculty who are frequently given or assigned courses from the university catalogue (not dissimilar, at times, to how students themselves enroll in these same courses) often inhabit an institutional context wherein the nature of their work is seen as inherently less valuable than courses proposed by their tenure-line colleagues, regardless of the material realities that went in to creating, planning, and teaching the courses. As Brad Hammer writes, “the belief that adjuncts and other ‘contingent’ instructors tend to be bottom-rung teachers can be seen in the policies of standardization that oftentimes demarcate a ‘goals-centered’ curriculum” (A1). Contingent faculty who teach multiple sections of the same course in a given semester and across multiple years engage in a constant institutional re-affirmation of this devalued commodification of their labor. Horner writes that “courses remain commodities, but they are more commonly the product of—owned by—institutions rather than individuals” (6). This commodification ignores the individual and semester-specific changes that make up the

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry* 1.2 (2018)

reality of each course section under the institutional desire for a given course to count for the same end-product valuation as required by the omnipresent course catalogue.

As Jennifer Ruth points out, tenure-track faculty are increasingly recognizing “our shared identity with adjunct faculty as academic labor” (Ruth and Bérubé 81) due to the ever-increasing reality that TT faculty also feel “overworked and underappreciated” (82). As Ruth recognizes, however, such a shared identity, with regard to how we conceptualize our labor in relation to our contingent colleagues, should not come at the expense of recognizing the very real distinctions between the material realities faced by TT faculty and contingent faculty. A consideration of time as a component of labor demands a nuanced return to the site of material conditions, and a focus on the specific instructor teaching in a specific semester with a specific set of students and resources. By doing so, we might develop ways of explicitly addressing the shared concerns between TT and contingent faculty, while still recognizing the very real material conditions of labor that distinguish these different “tiers” (Ruth and Bérubé 89) of academic laborers. Contingent faculty, including graduate teaching assistants, are routinely subjected to what Horner describes as the “denial of materiality” (7) affected by the desire for institutions to commodify their courses. Contingent faculty are seen primarily as those who engage in non-intellectual labor, because the courses they teach are seen as belonging primarily to the university and emerging from the institutional context of that university rather than the individual instructor’s own intellectual (abstracted) abilities. Meanwhile, Horner argues that TT faculty are subjected to the perils of the same distinction on the opposite end: “the distinction between intellectual and non-intellectual labor is embodied by the commodification of intellectual labor, which belies the location of that work in time as ongoing, processual, and social” (9). The “work” of tenure-line faculty is seen as intellectual work and therefore not subjected to the same materialities embodied by their contingent faculty colleagues. To combat this false dichotomy, Horner argues that “we need to approach the ‘academic’ as a material site for various sorts of work practices” (106).

### **Disciplinary Representation in a Position Statement**

One crucial indicator of the way our field conceptualizes academic labor is the position statement, a genre that has recently received more critical attention for how it conveys disciplinary assumptions with regards to academic labor (see McClure et al.) As such, before discussing my study, I will first turn to the National Council of Teachers of English’s (NCTE) 2010 “Position Statement on the Status and Working Conditions of Contingent Faculty,” performing some textual analysis with regards to what this document says about labor and the institutions where it is performed. This analysis is foregrounded by the materialist perspective offered by Fedukovich et al. and their recognition of an “internal disciplinary paradox: the field’s persistent striving for ethical—equal?—

working conditions for the contract faculty who teach in writing programs and its recognition of the reality of the institutional contexts in which these faculty teach” (127-128).

As I noticed with Horner's text, the NCTE Position Statement contains no explicit references to “time,” beyond some references in the section regarding “Fair Working Conditions” to certain things happening “in a timely manner.” The first claim regarding “Fair Working Conditions,” however (and also the first statement made in the entire position statement), is that “appointment/offer letters should clearly describe the position and identify workload distributions.” As one of the leading bodies in the field of writing pedagogy, the NCTE is articulating to its publics that it values clarity on behalf of the institutions that respect/follow it. The entirety of the “Fair Working Conditions” section focuses, at least indirectly, on the issue of clarity more so than establishing how it is defining either “fair” or what might make certain working conditions fair or unfair.

Beyond the first section on “Fair Working Conditions,” the NCTE Position Statement has three other sections: “Fair Compensation,” “Involvement in Shared Governance,” “Respect and Recognition,” and “Security of Employment.” I am concerned here largely with the second and fourth sections, “Fair Compensation” and “Respect and Recognition,” as I believe they have the strongest implications about institutional values of labor and time. The section regarding “Fair Compensation” opens with the line that faculty “should receive a salary that reflects their teaching duties and any duties outside the classroom they are asked to assume.” However, the NCTE Position Statement does not define its own terms, leaving each individual institution free to ultimately interpret how each faculty's salary “reflects their teaching duties,” as well as how those teaching duties themselves are defined. Furthermore, all labor performed in the time outside of the classroom is compressed into the sweeping general category of “any duties outside the classroom,” which echo Horner’s critique of the denial of materiality in composition labor (23, 29). Fedukovich et al. describe the oft-present problem of criteria that are not specifically outlined in disciplinary position statements, which naturally allow for institutional ignorance or abstraction (Fedukovich et al. 133). Ritter extends this notion to academic labor by suggesting that contingent faculty themselves may have to re-conceptualize some disciplinary assumptions about the writing and grading processes in order to manage their time: “writing teachers are increasingly pressured to be agents of literacy instruction and agents of personal care. We may need to decide which of these roles we want to prioritize if we expect to have reasonable working conditions for our already-undervalued writing faculty” (412). Inherent in the NCTE Position Statement's decision to leave “teaching duties” and “fair” salary as things that are entirely institutionally-defined

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 1.2 (2018)*

is a claim regarding how institutions are free to decide what divisions of time make up each faculty members “teaching duties.”

In the “Respect and Recognition” section of the NCTE Position Statement, the authors write that “faculty members serving in contingent positions should be viewed and treated as a valued and integral part of the academic faculty.” As I will discuss later, this ideal does not reflect what the teaching assistants in my study observed about their own status within the university. This statement also says something significant about the intended audience of the Position Statement; it implies that the Position Statement is written both by and (largely) for the “academic faculty” that might need to be told to value their contingent colleagues. This section is engaging in a rhetorical move common to the genre by leaving its most important terms (in this case, “valued and integral”) as things that can be entirely institutionally-defined. The Statement is also casting contingent faculty in positions where they are always already valued and integral, while ignoring the material conditions faced by individual contingent faculty. An institution could easily claim to be following the NCTE Position Statement by treating their contingent faculty as “valued and integral,” while not having an established set of criteria for justifying in what ways that is actually happening. In the same section, the Statement claims that “faculty members serving in contingent positions should have access to most, if not all, of the resources and services that are available to tenure-line faculty.” The obvious and intended reading of this statement is that contingent faculty be guaranteed certain resources; however, the statement also makes it quite clear that institutions are free to deny resources to contingent faculty. In that sense, any institution is following the Position Statement as long as it is offering some of its available resources to contingent faculty.

A time-oriented materialist addition to the Statement would include a more nuanced and defined categorization of “duties outside the classroom,” or a direct call for individual faculty and departments to at least define these meanings on their own terms, as contingent faculty are especially subject to what Horner describes as “the institutional framing of that work delegitimizes it in relation to its official, already degraded exchange value as the fulfilling of a requirement” (142). Hassel and Baird Giordano call for a position statement to “have the power to inform material conditions for instructors” and “establish the relationship between teaching conditions and student learning outcomes” (Hassel and Baird Giordano 149). The NCTE Position Statement places the institution above the individual, even where it seeks to guarantee certain conditions for the individual. This valuation happens in part because of the lack of established criteria for benefit or larger conceptualization of individual labor. With the Position Statement contextualizing the disciplinary realities faced by contingent faculty with regards to their academic labor, a more localized discussion is necessary to identify how and where these

larger problems play out in the lived experiences and material realities dealt with by contingent faculty's use of time.

### **The Study**

Foregrounding individual contingent faculty's material conditions allows for a translation of disciplinary concepts into lived ones, specifically the ways in which time is tied to implicit labor valuation at the level of the individual's relationship to their institution. Implicit labor valuation refers to things like wages, curricula, teaching workloads, assessment, and individuals' own internalizations and perceptions of their labor, and how it is valued within the institution. In that sense, implicit labor value refers to the institution addressing itself. To begin my examination of the "institution addressing itself," I created an online survey which asked three graduate teaching associates at a large research university in the Northeast United States (hereafter "Research University") a few questions about how they see their jobs, as well as how they believe their administrators view their jobs. By beginning my examination with a focus on graduate TA's views of labor and value, I am attempting to somewhat redress Steve Parks' claim that "the 'we' of composition often gets represented by the work of full-time, tenured compositionists" (122). Similarly, I follow Jennifer Ruth in recognizing that the working conditions of graduate students is often representative of those faced by contingent faculty, or simply that graduate students are contingent faculty (Ruth and Bérubé 62). Applications of this project will include addressing issues of teaching workloads, the separation of teaching and research being seen as work, and the subject positions that writing programs create for their teachers, specifically contingent faculty. Lived experiences of faculty and students—like those of all humans—resist generalization, and I encourage administrators to re-approach the suggestions I offer here in their own departments rather than reading my analysis as suggestive beyond the scope of its data.

I emailed the Research University Writing Program's Graduate Teaching Assistant Listserv, and, potentially as a result of this study happening near the end of the semester, I received three responses from teaching assistants who were willing to participate in the survey. Each respondent was randomly assigned a number (initially 1, 2, and 3) that I asked them to include with their survey response and later used to correlate their responses on the second survey with the first. While the small sample size of the survey made it difficult to draw programmatic generalizations, the use of two surveys (discussed below), relying entirely on open-ended responses from the same three respondents', places this more closely aligned with what Lauer and Asher call "qualitative descriptive research," (32) as it seeks to identify participants' understanding of their own contexts. As such, I refer to the survey respondents throughout as



Respondent A, B, and C, and much of my analysis focuses on putting their responses to different questions into conversation with one another.

### **Survey 1**

1. What part of your job do you find the most “valuable” in terms of your own work?
2. What part of your job do you think your supervisors value the most?
3. What part(s) of your job do you find to be the most time-consuming?
4. How do you think you see your job differently than your supervisors see your job?
5. What do you find to be the biggest difference between what you thought your job would be before you started, and the practical day-to-day work of your job?

In my research process, reading the results of this survey taught me two things: one lesson about my methodology and one about the direction I wanted this project to take. I noticed an underlying focus on time being an important issue in the responses, which led me to decide to focus this project more directly on a materialist examination of time (as a more specific direction than simply labor), as I’ve already outlined. I felt that the first survey led to responses that largely focused on grading, and so I also wanted to see what other kinds of issues could be addressed or were perceived as problematic by teaching assistants. Secondly, as MacNealy writes regarding surveys in *Strategies for Empirical Research in Writing*, “not surprisingly, purpose affects question content and design” (152). I believe that my initial survey was driven by some of my own underlying purposes, and so I decided to revise the survey and asked the same three teaching assistants to fill it out again. The second survey focuses more explicitly on time as its purpose.

### **Survey 2**

1. What part of your job do you find most valuable?
2. What would you rather spend time on as a teacher?
3. Are there parts of your time that you feel are wasted/not well-spent?
4. Where do you feel the pressure to spend your time the way you do comes from?
5. Do you feel the investment of your time is compensated fairly? Why or why not? (“compensation” might mean things other than pay, although you can answer it to only include pay).

Following Haas, Takayoshi, and Carr, I created an inductive coding scheme using emergent categories (54), which I then used to identify frequencies and significant correlations across the survey responses. The most prevalent data codes based on frequency and relation to my research

question were “Teaching,” “Writing,” “Students,” “Time,” “Work,” “Self,” and “Program.” My identification of frequencies allowed me to “understand our object of study in a way that mere description did not” (55). Table 1 below reflects the frequency distribution of pronoun usage, contention between self and supervisor, commonly used referents, and cross-referents across both surveys.

**Table 1: Frequency Distribution Among Survey Responses**

Respondent	Frequency of first person pronouns	Frequency of perceived contention between self and supervisors	Most commonly used referents	Most frequent cross-references
A	Low (14)	High	Students (11), Writing (10), Work (11), Time (8)	“Time” and “Work,” “Self” and “Work”
B	High (46)	Low	Teaching (18), Time (11), Work (12), Students (10)	“Teaching” and “Students,” “Self” and “Teaching”
C	Low (16)	High	Work (13), Students (10), Teaching (7), Writing (6)	“Work” and “Job,” “Program” and “Teaching”

Respondent A and C, for example, both used few first-person pronouns in their responses, while at the same time expressing a strong degree of perceived contention between themselves and their supervisors. Respondent B, meanwhile, had the highest frequency of first-person pronouns, while at the same time expressing a relatively low degree of perceived contention between themselves and their supervisors. These responses were consistent with each respondents’ commonly used coding referents, as Respondents A and C used more referents related to their own work or writing in correlation with perceived difficulties or contention

between them and their supervisors. Respondent B also used the highest number of first-person pronouns throughout all of their survey responses.

## **Results**

The first observation I'd like to discuss from the surveys is the response to question #4 on the first survey: "what part(s) of your job do you find to be the most time-consuming?" Every teaching assistant who responded to this survey indicated that "grading," (Respondent A) "grading, definitely, and responding to drafts," (Respondent B) or "logistical stuff—grading...mandatory meetings" (Respondent C) was the aspect of their job they found to be the most time-consuming. While this as a phenomenon is not surprising, I want to contrast this to question #2 on the survey: "What part of your job do you find the most "valuable" in terms of your own work?" Respondents said things such as "learning from my students' writing," (Respondent A) "connecting research projects... [to] teaching," (Respondent B) and "[our] community of fellow educators and scholars" (Respondent C). Yet again, these responses are not themselves surprising (nor do I think they are atypical); however, I want to draw attention here to the fact that the thing graduate TAs have identified as the most time-consuming part of their job is never once identified as the thing they find most valuable about their job. As teachers and administrators, we might consider the implications of how time spent on our labor can be viewed as completely separate from what we believe is valuable about our work. As Horner argues about writing, "the 'work' of writing may signify not the activity of production, distribution, and consumption but the commodity, removed ("alienated") from the social relations and means of its production" (209). As my respondents suggest, their academic role may be the institutionally-valued commodity of labor or their own perceptions of why that work matters.

Question #3 on the second survey asked respondents to identify parts of their time they believe are not well-spent. Interestingly, the emphasis that all three respondents placed was not on formal evaluation and assessment, although this was mentioned directly once and indirectly once. Respondent A wrote "Grading," followed by other issues such as office hours and training sessions. The same respondent identified another issue with the time spent on grading: the "time explaining to my students that grades are not the most important thing." Another respondent wrote that less time could be given to the peer response process, and another respondent identified "commenting on student writing," which implies a component of the grading process, if not the formal act of evaluation itself. One respondent also wrote that "graduate students who can separate their work-work from their school-work can better prioritize their time," representing an internalization of the problematic divide between what teachers see as their "work" and the labor of teaching. The institutional pressures placed on this individual TA may have led him or her to further

this division as a means of coping with what they see as unreasonable institutional demands.

Our typical perception of assessment as a partly subjective aspect of our teaching is reflective of the anxieties discussed earlier in Tinberg's 4C's Call. When we feel obligated to justify or defend our work (to the public, to other disciplines, to university administrators, and sources of funding), the thing that we have largely internalized about that work—primarily the thing that we spend time on—is something that places us in a highly individual, subjective position. Gerald Graff writes that college instructors “are generally oblivious to the teaching of their colleagues. How long would most institutions survive if their workers knew as little about one another's tasks as we academics know about our colleagues' teaching?” (153). Most of our time spent as educators is engaged in something individual, isolated, subjective and of uncertain value, as Mark Gellis writes that “providing feedback to students through written comments is often a waste of time” (416). While Gellis' claim is by no means representative of general feelings toward assessment, there is obviously a disconnect between time spent and perceived value gained. Respondent B expressed a similar concern about their students' perceived value of the field-canonical peer-review process. As educators and administrators, we are compelled to manage and spend our time in certain ways, regardless of what we believe is the value gained through that time expenditure. And yet, it's something that we feel compelled to devote time to, something we feel anxious about when called upon to defend it. Ann M. Penrose writes that “the role of material conditions in shaping professional identity cannot be overstated,” (119) which is especially troubling when our relationship to those material conditions are uncertain or knowingly unvalued.

Each respondent's answers on the second survey show emphasis on the pressures of the institution. The issue of the “rigid” curriculum was brought up twice, and two of the three respondents wrote that they felt their level of compensation was not “fair.” These answers show a significant amount of tension between graduate teaching assistants and their institution. Respondents A and C saw a large gap between what they value about their work, and what their supervisors value about their work. Not surprisingly, these two respondents also identified a sense of feeling like they were doing the “dirty work” of teaching, and every respondent believed that their supervisors weren't able to understand the importance of or the time and energy required to do their jobs. Jennifer Ruth describes this as an especially troublesome component of the contingent faculty/institution relationship: “people anxious to secure employment even as an adjunct do not believe that the circumstances in which they work are fair or healthy (because they aren't), and so a substantial percentage of the faculty have at best an ambivalent relationship to the university” (Ruth and Bérubé 70). My respondents' answers show that this ambivalence can be attributed at least in part due to the ways in which not only their labor is valued by the institution, but how that labor is further

conceived with regards to time. Citing Joe Berry, Jennifer Ruth notes that many contingent faculty make less than what would translate to an hourly minimum wage, which excludes very real labor such as commuting time (Ruth and Bérubé 60). However, as Fedukovich et al. point out, “contract faculty are conducting the same kinds of professional activity as their tenured colleagues, but without departmental support or recognition and, in many cases, with a dramatically increased teaching load” (134). When graduate teaching assistants reflect on the time they spend teaching, for example, they are responding to a large amount of institutional pressure that often gets metonymized as their direct supervisors. It is interesting to note Respondent B’s usage of first-person pronouns, which reflected the fact that Respondent B perhaps felt more recognized as an individual than A or C, who both had a much higher frequency of perceived contention between themselves and the program. Institutional apparatuses such as standard syllabi, textbooks, grading, and teaching policies exist to ensure a minimum level of job performance among graduate teaching assistants, but they also function to force TAs to manage their time in certain ways. Therefore, an institutional heuristic necessarily carries with it a push towards professional conformity, which at any level is going to create points of tension where TAs might have different pedagogical or philosophical values of time. Horner argues that student writing should be seen as a site where “pressures get negotiated,” (242) although I would also apply that to the practice of teaching. By examining the specific and numerous ways our teaching and administration do represent sites for negotiating pressures, we may be better situated to critique and improve otherwise implicit issues.

### **Discussion: Contingent Labor and the Institution**

One of the recurring issues I noticed at each level of analysis here was a tension between administrator expectations and graduate teaching assistant responses/perceptions of those assumptions. In that sense—and I’m thinking especially of the NCTE Position Statement—administrators should be as transparent as possible with their expectations and the reasons behind them. It is in the nature of bureaucracies and institutions to silently move away from transparency and towards an already-established sense of communal expectations. It may be in the nature of individual instructors to respond to those expectations by resisting in opaque ways. As administrators and as teachers, we might benefit from more open discussion of our reasoning behind our expectations and our deviations from institutional expectations. One way to enact such an endeavor would be for academics of any station to pay closer attention to their own use of time, especially with regards to which components of their labor are treated as quantified (paid) time and those which are not. As far as my survey respondents are concerned, institutions may not actually be paying contingent faculty for the labor they perform and are instead paying them for a faux-intellectualized labor that has already been cast as non-intellectual—abstracting the concept of their work while refusing to

abstract the work itself. In this regard, my survey respondents are also not atypical and instead reflective of other examinations of contingent faculty labor (see Hendricks, Penrose, Bérubé).

Furthermore, the relatively high degree of contingent faculty teaching our first-year writing courses (Fedukovich et al. 133), coupled with the perception of these courses as non-intellectual or removed from “real” academic work (Horner 135), contributes to the marginalization of composition within the institution. Hassel and Baird Giordano draw attention to a component of this marginalization, which is the “encroachment of an increasingly stratified labor force in composition, one with multiple tiers of employees who experienced varying degrees of status, benefits, and resources” (147). One obvious way to mitigate this stratification is for program administrators to increasingly recognize the labor performed by contingent faculty as intellectual labor, as well as increased recognition of graduate students as contingent faculty. Hassel and Baird Giordano, among others (Ruth, Bérubé and Ruth), turn this claim to program development: “the criteria that departments should prioritize when working on program development are evidence of instructors’ reflective practice, professional activity, and institutional citizenship, not their employment status” (155). As Steven Shulman points out, the rise in contingent faculty is largely removed from financial constraints and is instead reflective of “the priorities and values of administrators who ultimately drive hiring decisions” (11). This claim necessitates that administrators recognize the myriad ways in which contingent labor in their departments is not simply a budgetary or administrative bugbear but, rather, a touchstone for institutional valuation of our discipline itself.

### **Conclusions**

Problematic issues regarding how individual instructors were cast in relation to their institution often took the form of underlying institutional assumptions regarding time. Authors of all writing program publications, both ones that involve addressing ourselves and our audiences/publics, then, might benefit from more careful consideration of how individual instructors are imagined, and what subject positions we create for them. With my critique of the NCTE Statement in mind, I think it's important to say here that I'm not necessarily calling for more discipline-wide standardization, but perhaps simply more open recognition of each individual institution's role in creating subject positions for their faculty. I especially admire Jennifer Ruth’s reflexivity regarding the ease regarding which we, as administrators, can often fall victim to the tantalizing allure of short-term solutions and budgetary shortcuts. If we are to suggest resisting the false dichotomy of intellectual and non-intellectual labor present in our academic workforce, then we must also recognize the work of the administrator as reliant not on intangible disciplinary or institutional

abstractions but on specific material realities and conditions that our day-to-day actions constantly re-engage and re-create.

Furthermore, administrators might consider ways that contingent faculty in our departments could become more openly involved in the creation of departmental expectations and not just the reception of them. This could be done not simply for the sake of getting each individual instructor's feedback and opinions but also for helping contingent faculty see places where inflexibility and standardization might be necessary. Bérubé and Ruth remind us that “faculty working conditions are student working conditions,” (138) and institutional challenges and material realities will invariably affect our students’ experiences in our classrooms. This itself is a localized, individual reality, one which will depend more on department-level collaboration than discipline-wide position statements, although their interdependence is ever-present. This concern rings especially true for graduate teaching assistants, who are constantly navigating the difficult realm of disciplinary becoming (see Curry) and a large number of what Christine Pearson Casanave calls “invisible ‘real-life’ struggles” (102-111). Sue Doe remarks that tenure alone need not be seen as the “sole mechanism to professional fulfillment and success in the academic setting,” (61) but rather the degree to which any faculty, contingent or otherwise, is able to control their labor and find respect from their localized institutional communities.

We might benefit from more formal structuring and discussion of how time influences and affects our roles as administrators, teachers, and as students. As I have argued here, time is an important consideration that should be treated separately (if not entirely independently) from labor, especially within materialist perspectives. At the very least, such a perspective would help give us a more nuanced and productive set of terms and criteria with which to address and critique our own work. That is the extension of this project, and I believe engaging in such work would help us become better prepared to address what I referred to as the “existential crisis” of writing pedagogy in higher education. Horner advocates having “students investigate the impact that being students...has on their writing” (243). No amount of self-reflexivity on the part of faculty and administrators is too much, and that part of the way we can begin enacting this self-reflexivity is by openly and critically examining the role our own distributions of time have on our work. As a teacher and administrator, engaging in this project has already changed my own notions of time and labor value in my own work. I humbly submit that we keep doing so, regardless of difficulty, and I boldly proclaim that there is no better time to begin than now.

## Works Cited

- Bérubé, Michael and Jennifer Ruth. *The Humanities, Higher Education, & Academic Freedom: Three Necessary Arguments*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Casanave, Christine Pearson. "What Advisors Need to Know about the Invisible 'Real-Life' Struggles of Doctoral Dissertation Writers." *Supporting Graduate Student Writers: Research, Curriculum, & Program Design*, edited by Steve Simpson, Nigel A. Caplan, Michelle Cox, and Talinn Phillips. University of Michigan Press, 2016, pp. 97-116.
- Conference on College Composition and Communication. "Call for Program Proposals: The Public Work of Composition." National Council of Teachers of English, 2013. Howard Tinberg, 2013 Program Chair.
- Curry, Mary Jane. "More Than Language: Graduate Student Writing as 'Disciplinary Becoming.'" *Supporting Graduate Student Writers: Research, Curriculum, & Program Design*, edited by Steve Simpson, Nigel A. Caplan, Michelle Cox, and Talinn Phillips. University of Michigan Press, 2016, pp. 78-96.
- Doe, Sue. "Opportunity and Respect: Keys to Contingent Faculty Success." *Rewriting Success in Rhetoric & Composition Careers*, edited by Amy Goodburn, Donna LeCourt, and Carrie Leverenz. Parlor Press, 2013, pp. 51-68.
- Fedukovich, Casie J., Susan Miller-Cochran, Brent Simoneaux, and Robin Snead. "A State of Permanent Contingency: Writing Programs, Hiring Practices, and a Persistent Breach of Ethics." *Labored: The State(ment) and Future of Work in Composition*, edited by Randall McClure, Dayna V. Goldstein, and Michael A. Pemberton. Parlor Press, 2017, pp. 126-146.
- Gellis, Mark. "Grading with an Attitude." *Pedagogy*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2002, pp. 416-419.
- Graff, Gerald. "Why Assessment?" *Pedagogy*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2010, pp. 153-165.
- Haas, Christina, Pamela Takayoshi, and Brandon Carr. "Analytic Strategies, Competent Inquiries, and Methodological Tensions in the Study of Writing." *Writing Studies Research in Practice: Methods and Methodologies*, edited by Mary P. Sheridan and Lee Nickoson. Southern Illinois University Press, 2012, pp. 51-62.
- Hammer, Brad. "From the Editor: The Need for Research in 'Contingency Studies.'" *Forum: Newsletter for Issues About Part-Time and Contingent Faculty*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2010, pp. A1-A3.
- Hassel, Holly, and Joanna Baird Giordano. "Contingency, Access, and the Material Conditions of Teaching and Learning in the 'Statement of Principles.'" *Labored: The State(ment) and Future of Work in Composition*, edited by Randall McClure, Dayna V. Goldstein, and Michael A. Pemberton. Parlor Press, 2017, pp. 126-146.

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 1.2 (2018)*



- Haswell, Richard H. "Quantitative Methods in Composition Studies: An Introduction to Their Functionality." *Writing Studies Research in Practice: Methods and Methodologies*, edited by Mary P. Sheridan and Lee Nickoson. Southern Illinois University Press, 2012, pp. 185-196.
- Hendricks, Bill. "Making a Place for Labor: Composition and Unions." *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University*, edited by Bousquet, Mark, Tony Scott, and Leo Parascondola. Southern Illinois UP, 2004, pp. 83-99.
- Horner, Bruce, and John Trimbur. "English Only and U.S. College Composition." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2002, pp. 594-630.
- Horner, Bruce, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Royster, and John Trimbur. "Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach." *College English*, vol. 73, no. 3, 2011, 303-21.
- Horner, Bruce. *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique*. State University of New York Press, 2000.
- Lauer, Janice M. and Asher, J. William. *Composition Research: Empirical Designs*. Oxford UP, 1988.
- MacNealy, Mary Su. *Strategies for Empirical Research in Writing*. Longman, 1999.
- National Council of Teachers of English. "Position Statement on the Status and Working Conditions of Contingent Faculty." 30 Sept. 2010, [http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/contingent\\_faculty](http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/contingent_faculty).
- Penrose, Ann M. "Professional Identity in a Contingent-Labor Profession: Expertise, Autonomy, Community in Composition Teaching." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2012, pp. 108-26.
- Ritter, Kelly. "'Ladies Who Don't Know Us Correct Our Papers': Postwar Lay Reader Programs and Twenty-First Century Contingent Labor in First-Year Writing." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2012, pp.387-419.
- Shulman, Steven. "Contingency in Higher Education: Evidence and Explanation." *Academic Labor: Research and Artistry* vol. 1, no. 1, 2017.
- Strickland, Donna. "The Managerial Unconscious of Composition Studies." *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University*, edited by Bousquet, Mark, Tony Scott, and Leo Parascondola. Southern Illinois UP, 2004, p. 46-56.

## **Appendix A: First Survey, “Labor, Value and Pedagogy”**

### **1. What is your current job in higher education?**

All. Teaching English 112 to freshmen at [Research University]

### **2. What part of your job do you find the most “valuable” in terms of your own work?**

A. Learning from my students' writing and the mistakes they make, and apply it to my own writing.

B. I consider my teaching and my research/grad student stuff both to be “work.” I think my current research project gives me insight into my teaching, but I don't find that my teaching relates directly to my research. This could change with other projects.

C. The community of fellow educators and scholars with, for, and from which I am able to develop my ideas about pedagogy and my own work and writing.

### **3. What part of your job do you think your supervisors value the most?**

A. My ability to keep the class focused, motivated, and facilitate student participation.

B. I think they probably value whatever it is that I do to fulfill my contractual responsibilities and teach FYW as well as I can. I don't get the impression that they value conferencing, say, more than they value responding to student work. I've always gotten the sense the Writing Program recognizes that teaching FYW has multiple facets. I think the Writing Program recognizes that I am also a graduate student, but I am not a graduate student in their department—that part of my life is not something they're supervising (it's kind of like I'm working for someone else). I consider being a student my job, too, but it's not work I'm getting paid for (directly). I have another job outside higher ed, and I don't expect them to value that equally with the work I do directly for them.

C. That graduate students shoulder the burden of teaching the most onerous and tedious of classes to teach seems very valuable to them.

**4. What part(s) of your job do you find to be the most time-consuming?**

A. Grading.

B. Grading, definitely, and responding to drafts. I used to spend a ton of time on lesson planning, but as I have taught longer, that's taken less time.

C. The logistical and program-wide stuff: grading, preparing lessons, acting as disciplinarian in the former case; and the mandatory meetings, review sessions, and supplementary training seminars in terms of the latter.

**5. How do you think you see your job differently than your supervisors see your job?**

A. I think I expect a bit more from my students than my supervisors. I believe the students can process more in a class period than the current expectations.

B. I don't get the impression that I see my job differently than my direct supervisors. Everyone in the Writing Program staff teaches FYW (or has taught it recently), and they have all been graduate students. Probably some parts of the graduate student experience are less vivid to them the longer they have been out of graduate school, but I've never felt like their experience was totally different from mine. Everyone is balancing their own writing/research/admin work and teaching. I don't know if higher level administrators who have never taught writing have the same sense of my job as I do. I haven't had much interaction with higher-level administrations, and when I imagine them, I think they probably assume I teach a lot about proper semi-colon use. But I don't know that for sure.

C. I don't think, as an educator, that I am a purveyor of a commodity or commodities. Not that this is the conscious way in which my supervisors would articulate what I am doing, but the emphasis on a general set of "takeaways" from writing classes — certain kinds of subjectivity/interiority (which are distinctly liberal in the pejorative sense), the ability to write a "successful" college essay which means effacing its difference from other essays (conforming to a kind of model) even as we emphasize the aforementioned subjectivity/interiority and "uniqueness" of each student in their essays: in short the continuation of a process of interpellation and internalization of disciplinary/regulatory mechanisms and discourses that begins with public/primary/compulsory education — the fact that my supervisors stress this and in the way they do suggests to me that there is an undercurrent of subject-production (and interpellation) which I see as pernicious and even something to work against, however difficult or impossible that may be.

**6. What do you find to be the biggest difference between what you thought your job would be before you started, and the practical day-to-day work of your job?**

**A.** I thought the job would be less challenging and stimulating than it actually is. I'm very pleased it exceeded my expectations.

**B.** I didn't realize how much time and energy teaching would take. During the semester, most of my energy goes toward teaching. Finding a balance was harder when I was in coursework because I HAD to balance the two more equally. Now that I'm out of coursework, I tend to devote more time to teaching during the semester and more time to writing outside of the semester (when I'm not getting paid by [Research University]).

**C.** Most surprising was the total falsity of the idea that as graduate students we should prioritize our own work over and above our work as teachers. A whole system of mechanisms — part of them manifested as the busywork I described in earlier answers — gives the lie to this oft-repeated mantra which I was led to believe, foolishly, were a possibility as a graduate student writing teacher.

## **Appendix B: Second Survey, “Time, Labor and Pedagogy”**

### **1. What part of your job do you find most valuable?**

**A.** The community of colleagues with whom I can share and develop pedagogical and theoretical ideas to advance my own career as both a teacher and a thinker.

**B.** Conferencing and written feedback. These allow me to interact with students as individual writers and talk to them directly about their work (Of course, valuing written feedback this highly also leads me to spending lots of time on i.).

**C.** The in-class discussions which vary from being on the topic of writing to much larger ideas/issues/concerns are most valuable for both me and the students.

### **2. What would you rather spend more time on as a teacher?**

**A.** Foregrounding in discussion the political concerns inherent in all writing — the relation of writing to power relations, writing as power relation, the ways in which it is a site of exploitation and also resistance — to put it briefly. I also wish I had more time to work on more difficult texts, or at least to dive into difficult texts more thoroughly with students. The close reading skills, though arguably the most important thing in the class, often get set aside for things like “sentence-level writing” or “grammar” or “writing with authenticity.”

**B.** I wish I had the time to conference twice a semester when teaching two sections. When I teach one, I conference in Units II and III. With two sections, I can't do that without sacrificing time that should be dedicated to my own academic work.

**C.** One-to-one or small-group meetings.

### **3. Are there parts of your time that you feel are wasted/ not well-spent?**

**A.** Grading. Office hours where students don't attend. Militantly mandatory training sessions. All the time explaining to my students that grades are not the most important thing.

**B.** Sometimes I wish we had less emphasis on peer review in our syllabus. I feel like I have to make room for it every unit, but my students seem to consistently feel that peer review doesn't help them as writers as much as other assignments.

C. Commenting on student writing takes a lot of time, so I have been trying to figure out ways to make it more productive for both me and my students.

**4. Where do you feel the pressure to spend your time the way you do comes from?**

A. The shockingly rigid given curriculum, and the ways in which I'm unable to deviate — as I recently found out — from certain constraints such as paper length. This leads me to spend a great deal of time crafting assignments that don't undermine what I think most important about college and life — which can also be read as a preservation of the vital politics in and of the classroom space — but which also pander to the extant goals of the writing program. I am also encouraged to introduce complicated, “fun” activities into the class (to make learning “fun” for people who in many cases have no choice but to go to college to get a marginally self-sustaining job — thanks, capitalism) that take up more of my time than is worth the marginal difference in student response. I could go on. But there is an entire ideological apparatus at work in the writing program as I have experienced it which encourages us to focus on our own work but then at the same time to do increasingly complex activities with students to be “good” teachers.

B. I want to keep my students happy with the course so they stay engaged, and I want them to feel that they're learning. This leads to spending way too much time on written feedback.

C. Because I am actually interested in my work as a teacher (since it influences my work as a student), there is pressure to apply myself equally to both jobs, which is a lot. Graduate students who can separate their work-work from their school-work can better prioritize their time.

**5. Do you feel the investment of your time is compensated fairly? Why or why not? (“compensation” might mean things other than pay, although you can answer it to only include pay).**

A. No. I am paid a pittance to do the dirty work of teaching introductory English in a way that takes away from time I need as a graduate student to pursue my various interests. These interests do not matter to the people who employ me. My union is rendered powerless by state and university measures. The rights the union is trying to protect do not matter to the people who employ me. My students do not think I am a good teacher when I do what I am supposed to do — teach them writing — and I do not give them good grades for doing mediocre work. As a non-professorial educator, I do not matter, for all intents and purposes. I am a placeholder. But at least I'm aware of it.

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 1.2 (2018)*

**B.** No. I spend more than twenty hours a week on teaching-related tasks on a fairly regular basis when teaching two sections. The increase in time spent on teaching-related work during the two-section semester should warrant a proportional increase in paid compensation. If I'm going to be forced to neglect my academic work in order to teach, I'd at least like to be paid more for it.

**C.** I am earning a degree and a stipend by teaching, which is fair.