

Academic Labor: Research and Artistry

Volume 4 *A National Snapshot of the Material
Working Conditions of Contingent Faculty in
Composition and Technical and Professional
Communication*

Article 2

2020

From the Editors

Editors of ALRA

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Recommended Citation

of ALRA, Editors (2020) "From the Editors," *Academic Labor: Research and Artistry*: Vol. 4 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/alra/vol4/iss1/2>

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Academic Labor: *Research & Artistry*

Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 4.1 (Special Issue 2020)

From the Editors

This special issue of *Academic Labor: Research & Artistry* features the research of **Lisa Melonçon**, **Mahli Mechenbier**, and **Laura Wilson** on the material conditions of contingent faculty in writing and communication programs across the United States. In the articles that follow, the contributors provide the largest data set specific to contingent writing faculty to date, and, from this, offer a detailed analysis “of what it really means to work off the tenure track.” The research, both quantitative and qualitative, offers new data and perspective for considering the material working conditions of contingency.

The focus on composition and technical and professional communication (TPC) faculty is opportune and appropriate, especially as the American Association of University Professors AAUP points out that “contingent appointments are often clustered in programs with very high levels of predictability—such as freshman writing courses” (“Background Facts”). However, contingency is a factor facing nearly every academic department and no conversation on academic labor is complete without acknowledging contingent conditions.

Given that there may be widespread understanding of what qualifies as material conditions, Melonçon, Mechenbier, and Wilson quickly point readers to the designation of “the day-to-day working conditions of faculty, such as teaching loads and institutional support” (Melonçon, England & Ilyasova 2019).

Acknowledging the fraught definitions surrounding contingency, including criticism of the term itself, the authors rely largely on the AAUP classifications along with definitions provided by Mechenbier’s 2015 chapter “Contingent Faculty and OWI” and include full-time non-tenure-track faculty, visiting assistant professors, part-time faculty (also known by the term adjunct), and post-doctoral fellows.

The contributors divide their work into six articles. The first, “Introduction to a National Snapshot of the Material Working Conditions of Contingent Faculty in Composition and Technical Professional Communication” presents context and background for the study. Outlining the need for data and contingent voices to be heard, Melonçon, Mechenbier, and Wilson point readers to the lack of data-driven discussions on material environments and situations involving contingency in writing fields (a clear impetus for their research). The data gathered not only provides Melonçon, Mechenbier, and Wilson evidence for their own analysis, but offers raw data for future inquiry. The introduction also outlines a key aspect of the research, which is that composition and TPC need to listen to contingent faculty and these faculty need to feel safe in speaking up about the material realities without fearing for their jobs or other workplace retribution. The researchers emphasize that contingent faculty should not be objects of study, but voices with

agency. To have agency, voices must be listened to and respected; hence, the call for attention to “the precarity of contingency.”

“Results and Findings from the Survey” presents data gathered from 313 participant responses to a 41-question survey. Melonçon, Mechenbier, and Wilson examine factors ranging across demographics (including gender, race, institution type, and education levels), material work conditions (such as number of courses, support, and designated office space), compensation, training, professional development, reappointment, and job satisfaction. What sets this section apart is that in addition to quantitative data, the researchers add detailed respondent quotations. Acknowledging the number of quotes is atypical for academic articles, Melonçon, Mechenbier, and Wilson remind us that their work involves “narratives in context,” and adding the voices of respondents gives them agency that might otherwise be lost in the translation of data.

Presenting a discussion of potential action points presented by the data, as well as a continuation of direct quotes from respondents, “Data Takeaways” examines some of the materiality faced by contingent faculty. Included are four comprehensive sections on teaching load, significance and application of titles, professional development opportunities, and qualified and quality (or the expertise of contingent faculty and how qualified faculty affect the quality of instruction) since many have argued, starting with the California Faculty Association in the 1970s, that material conditions are teaching and learning conditions. In this article, Melonçon, Mechenbier, and Wilson work to create a more holistic perspective on conditions of contingency by offering detailed actions that can be taken by faculty and administrators in composition and TPC programs. A must read for anyone in these programs as the suggested actions not only point to solutions to each of the article’s four dedicated topics (teaching load, titles, professional development, and qualified and quality), but emphasize awareness of academic labor conditions.

“Affective Investment” explores the complexities of emotional labor facing contingent faculty. The authors “provide an extended definition of affective investment and then move to discussions from the data and interviews that reflect the material dimensions of how affective investment impacts contingent faculty in three critical areas: salary and contract; workload and autonomy; and value.” Pulling from influential scholarship in composition, the researchers outline affective investment as going beyond emotion to include an aspect of embodiment and to elicit the personal involvement, or investment, required of teaching. Melonçon, Mechenbier, and Wilson theory build by weaving together data analysis, traditional theory, and primary respondent quotations. The article also focuses on the important contradiction that emerged from the survey results: “While the majority of contingent faculty reported feeling highly satisfied in their jobs, they also expressed a sense of unevenness and frustration with unfair working conditions.”

The article “Politics of Service” dives into the precarity of contingency as it relates to service, but not only the work done by serving on a committee. Instead, Melonçon, Mechenbier, and Wilson explain service as “to do work” and includes labor related to all aspects of teaching such as advising, mentoring, and, yes, committee work. One theme the researchers found across multiple types of service is the expectation of self-sacrifice placed on contingent faculty for the perceived common good of the program, department, or institution. The article highlights service to the institution as something contingent faculty seem apt to provide because of the immediate benefit to students. Another focus is on the pressure that student end of term evaluations (SETs) place on the pedagogical decisions made by contingent faculty. Among the pedagogical implications of SETs are those that derive from students whose material circumstances demand that they work but whose expectation is then that courses will be made less rigorous to accommodate their complex lives. Finally, the authors address the sense of contingency as it relates to ownership of intellectual property. Specifically, the work of online course design which is so often fulfilled by contingent faculty in composition and TPC programs. The politics of service are complex, and Melonçon, Mechenbier, and Wilson offer up key insights, driven by data, for our consideration.

In “Looking Forward: Considering the Next Steps for Contingent Labor Material Work Conditions,” the contributors call for the academy to move beyond the proverbial handwringing. They offer new ways of addressing contingency through incremental and intentional steps: starting with acknowledging that the de-professionalization of college-level teaching has directly resulted in an entrenching of the hierarchies within higher education. To help counter this, Melonçon, Mechenbier, and Wilson offer a change management approach, essentially a kind of curriculum development for re-envisioning structures involved in faculty operations and founded in ideas presented in Donna Strickland’s *Managerial Unconscious*. Don’t let the authors’ idea of “incremental steps” deceive you as simplistic. Their first proposal is the elimination of first-year composition (FYC) as a general education requirement, which they acknowledge as being a seismic shift for institutions. Of course, this is not a new idea, but it is newly made in this context. Second, they suggest shifting the TPC service course model. Third, they look at the “cost ingredients” that go into adjunct hires as a way to argue against the notion that temporary faculty save money. Finally, Melonçon, Mechenbier, and Wilson remind readers that individuals in departments have agency in making transformations, and the implementation of change management techniques will allow systemic changes to occur at a moment when action to address the material concerns of contingency is imperative. “By not taking action,” they argue, “we are no longer innocent bystanders. We are guilty of the burden of precarity that contingent faculty deal with on a daily basis.”

The collective scholarship in this special issue makes the invisible visible and provides a much-needed foundation on which to rethink approaches to contingency in higher education, improve the material conditions of contingent writing faculty, and extrapolate data for further research. As, Melonçon, Mechenbier, and Wilson point out, contingent faculty are not “a problem to be solved,” but “a structural issue” in need of further understanding in order to work toward improving working conditions. This improvement must be done via the material—provided in this special issue through data and evidence.

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