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## From “Spring Break” to “Reading Days”: Contingency, Relations of Power, and Positionalities in Experiences of Overwork During Academic Breaks

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# Academic Labor: *Research & Artistry*

# From “Spring Break” to “Reading Days”: Contingency, Relations of Power, and Positionalities in Experiences of Overwork During Academic Breaks

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## Abstract

In this article, the authors analyze the impacts of their university eliminating Spring Break and replacing it with intermittent Reading Days during the Covid-19 pandemic. With particular attention to contingency, relations of power, and positionalities, they offer narratives of their lived experiences with Reading Days as a graduate student (Author 1) and as a

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Ann Shivers-McNair is an assistant professor in the Department of English at the University of Arizona, on the lands of the Tohono O’odham and Pascua Yaqui Peoples. She is the author of *Beyond the Makerspace: Making and Relational Rhetorics* (University of Michigan Press, 2021), and her work has appeared in journals such as *Across the Disciplines*; *College English*; *Computers and Composition*; *enculturation*; *Kairos*; *Learning, Culture, and Social Interaction*; *Programmatic Perspectives*; and *Technical Communication*; and in edited collections and conference proceedings. She is an associate editor of *Technical Communication Quarterly* and a co-organizer of UX@UA, a user experience community in Tucson, Arizona.

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

**Abstract, cont.**

pre-tenure faculty member (Author 2). They also offer analysis of the public conversations surrounding the institutional decision. The article also addresses how the particularities of the narratives are symptomatic of a culture of overwork that predates and continues beyond the moment in time and place of the context described. Authors offer takeaways and calls to action that invite readers to continue examining and intervening in larger, persistent structures of inequity—particularly as they come to bear on academic breaks.

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**I**n this article, we trace the impacts of a culture of overwork on graduate student learning and labor in the context of an academic calendar change brought about by a global pandemic—specifically, our institution’s replacement of spring break with reading days spread throughout the semester to try to reduce the spread of Covid-19 in the Spring 2021 semester. We acknowledge that the particularities of the experiences we share are symptomatic of issues that predate and continue beyond the moment in time and place that we describe, even as the specific scenario of replacing a spring break with scattered reading days may be particular to this moment in a global pandemic, so we begin by situating the culture of overwork within broader structures of academic calendar changes and neoliberalized academic labor, as well as within our specific context. Then, with particular attention to contingency and relations of power, we offer analytical narratives of our lived experiences with overwork in relation to reading days from our specific positionalities: we are both white women, and at the time of writing this article, Kelli was a Ph.D. student who was working as a graduate administrator and supplemental instructor for online English courses, and Ann was a tenure-track assistant professor and director of an undergraduate major, minor, and certificate program.

As we embrace the power of narratives to illustrate and interrogate our conditions and possibilities, we also know the individual and institutional privileges in our narratives are particular to our own embodied experiences. As white women, we acknowledge that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and on caregivers as a result of intersecting systems of racism and oppression and as a result of converging and ongoing racial justice, public health, economic, and political crises. We also acknowledge that our individual labor as instructors is inextricably interconnected with the labor of other instructors, staff, administrators, student workers, and all members of our community. Because we are situating our argument about overwork during our institution’s pandemic

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

reading days within a broader understanding of structural inequities in academic labor, we conclude by offering takeaways and calls to action that invite readers to continue examining and intervening in larger, persistent structures of inequity as they come to bear on academic breaks, during and beyond times of crisis. After all, as Sarah Bartlett Wilson and C. Veronica Smith observe, for contingent instructors especially, “the need to develop courses, prep materials, and respond to students’ submissions nearly always bleeds (often heavily so) into weekends and long breaks” (7).

### **Crisis-Necessitated Academic Calendar Disruptions**

Academic calendar disruptions in response to disasters and crises are not new. But the Covid-19 pandemic presented new challenges for university leadership responding to these crises. Much of the focus in the scholarship on academic crisis management and crisis-necessitated academic calendar changes has been on environmental disasters, and specifically hurricanes. For example, both Dominic Beggan’s 2011 qualitative case study of Lamar University’s disaster recovery and Melissa Houston’s 2017 phenomenological case study of faculty members’ lived experiences with disaster-caused disruptions to academic continuity focus on hurricane disasters in the U.S. Gulf Coast region. In both cases, changes to the academic calendar were also accompanied by damage or destruction of institutions’ physical facilities and communication infrastructures. By contrast, the academic calendar change we experienced in Spring 2021—along with many other institutions who made similar decisions to try to reduce the spread of Covid-19—was not accompanied by significant disruptions to our physical or communication infrastructures. This response in Spring 2021 also occurred more than a year into an evolving global pandemic that had already disrupted the Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 terms in different ways (for example, at our institution the Spring 2020 spring break was extended by half a week to facilitate a rapid transition from in-person to online instruction).

Despite these differences, we recognize a commonality our recent academic calendar change has with past emergency-response academic calendar changes. The disruption of the calendar illuminated and exacerbated an existing culture of overwork, or what Houston describes as “faculty experiencing feelings of obligation to perform regardless of their own personal losses both financially and emotionally” (14). Like Houston, we focus on lived experiences to both illustrate and make sense of the ways a pandemic-necessitated academic calendar change exacerbated overwork in academic labor. Our stories attend to the materiality of our working conditions, extending the work of Lisa Melonçon, Mahli Xuan Mechenbier, and Laura Wilson, whose research seeks to understand the working conditions of contingent academic workers.

### **Structures of Neoliberalized Academic Labor**

In tracing overwork in our lived experiences of a crisis-necessitated academic calendar change during the Spring 2021 semester, we locate our understanding of overwork in relation to academic capitalism and neoliberalized labor, especially the ways these structures impact graduate students and marginalized workers. Our framework is inspired by Allison Laubach Wright’s *rhetoric of excellence*. Drawing on the work of Bill Readings and Christopher Carter, Wright explains that because “excellence” in higher education has positive associations and an apparent ideological emptiness—excellence “operates without solid referents” and “is applied across many different fields and used to judge disparate ideas”—“excellence actually works to hide the connections to practices that are concerned only with competition, allowing academic programs that have embraced market logic to paint themselves as student-centered” (273). Wright argues that excellence, then, is “a marker that is hard to turn away from because there is no direct content to critique, and it becomes one of the ways that academic capitalism spreads, not just in the corporate world or in the university administration, but in the behaviors of faculty and students” (272-273). Extending this definition, we also acknowledge how educational and support staff are impacted by the excellence ideology because all our work is interconnected, and those with less power are disproportionately impacted.

Drawing on Laubach Wright’s concept, we provide stories from our viewpoints which illustrate how rhetoric of excellence shaped our experiences with reading days (which were interspersed on varying days of different weeks through the Spring 2021 semester to replace spring break). In our cases as a graduate student worker and pre-tenure faculty member, we felt compelled by rhetoric of excellence to work beyond our contracted hours and assigned duties and outside of our institution’s recommendations about how to approach reading days. Ultimately, we believe rhetoric of excellence creates an environment of competition and overwork. Roberta Hawkins, Maya Manzi, and Diana Ojeda examine competition and market logics through a number of mechanisms that graduate students, in particular, experience:

fierce competition between increasing number of PhDs and postdocs hunting for a diminishing number of tenure-track positions on the job market; an increase in non-tenure track positions, adjunct or temporary teaching positions and other contractual hiring; more responsibilities for professors due to an increase in accountability and cuts in administrative staff and services; and more pressure to become entrepreneurs of knowledge in the competition for grants. (334)

Taken alongside Wright’s point that the slipperiness of “excellence” makes it difficult to critique even as it fuels competition, Hawkins, Manzi,

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry* 6.1 (2022)

and Ojeda's work emphasizes that a context of austerity further amplifies competition.

Hawkins, Manzi, and Ojeda argue that scarcity in universities' material resources (even before a global public health and economic crisis) further fuels competition through a culture of meritocracy in which "responsibility is internalized by and placed on graduate students for failing to adequately respond to increasing academic demands, pressure and competition. Instead of viewing these issues as a symptom of an increasingly problematic educational system, these issues become a measure of individual capacity and worth" (335). Hawkins, Manzi, and Ojeda also note that this structure of meritocracy mirrors that of the tenure system (335), and we observed this mirroring in comparing our own experiences as a graduate student and as a pre-tenure faculty member. By continuing to participate in systems that benefit from our excessive labor, we perpetuate such pressure and a culture of overwork that impacts all educational workers, and especially those with less power, including graduate students who experience the impacts from both student and contingent instructor positionalities.

Crucially, both Wright's analysis of rhetoric of excellence and Hawkins, Manzi, and Ojeda's findings about neoliberal competition highlight the ways in which competition and market logics infuse not only institutional discourses and policies but also the behaviors of faculty and graduate students. Hawkins, Manzi, and Ojeda locate the connection between institutional discourses and the behaviors of faculty and students in the individualistic logics of neoliberalization in academia. They explain that neoliberalism "convenes a 'free' subject who makes individual, rational choices and is responsible for them, and this freedom is what enables its domination" (334). In other words, locating moral and material responsibility in the individual actions and choices of educational workers creates and perpetuates a culture of overwork that disproportionately impacts those with less power. Specifically, the dominant (and often unacknowledged) norm for educational workers' individual moral responsibility is not neutral. Hawkins, Manzi, and Ojeda observe in their interviews with graduate students that notions of what constitutes a "good scholar" are often "deeply informed by masculine, white, middle-class and anglocentric ideals" (342). This observation resonates with Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez and Angela P. Harris' argument that the intersections of race, class, and gender in the norms and expectations for academics disproportionately marginalize women of color (2-3).

### **Positionalities and Relations of Power**

The marginalization of women of color and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in structures of academic capitalism and neoliberalized labor has a long history that shapes our present experiences. As scholars like Ibram X. Kendi have observed, the domination of individuals through

contemporary capitalism is rooted in the violent and disproportionate exploitation of Black and Brown bodies, beginning with the transatlantic slave trade of African peoples (213). The violence of what Kendi calls the “conjoined twins” of capitalism and racism (213) is ongoing through multiple crises and pandemics, including the Covid-19 pandemic which is the context of our analysis. This is why we follow legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality. Since introducing the concept of intersectionality in 1989, Crenshaw has more recently explained that “intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there. Many times that [way of thinking] erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things” (Columbia Law School). The unearned privileges of whiteness, both in our own identities and in our institutional discourses and practices, are an important (and, in our case, mitigating) part of the intersecting and interlocking relations of power in our experiences, even as we inhabit different roles in the institution.

In addressing the ways in which our academic labor experiences are entangled with our institutional status and our embodied positionalities, we continue the work of Genevieve Carter and Rickie-Ann Legleitner who argue that:

Naming, claiming, reflecting, and analyzing one’s positionality and/or intersectionality must go hand-in-hand with conversations about our academic work—teaching, administration, research, service, evaluation, etc.—as our positionality and intersectionality shape how we see the world, live in the world, experience the world, and respond to the world. (2)

At the same time, as Carter and Legleitner note, “academia’s neoliberal model forces us to deny the relational and human-driven side of academia; it forces us to deny our positionality and intersectionality for the institution’s greater good” (4). Thus, as two white women describing rhetorics and experiences of overwork, we seek to resist those neoliberal forces by acknowledging that our whiteness shields us from exploitation, underestimation, and violence that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and especially women of color face both in and outside academia. We also acknowledge the interconnectedness of our experiences and the experiences of educational workers in and beyond our campus community. We reflect on our intersecting privileges as we perpetuate and are impacted by a rhetoric of excellence and a culture of overwork. As well, we hope the analysis of our interconnected vulnerability as a graduate student and pre-tenure faculty member bring to light ways in which we can better advocate for others, especially those with less power.

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

We also believe that an analysis of our emotional experiences is important to our analysis of and advocacy against overwork in academic settings. Following the work of Sue Doe, Maria Maisto, and Janelle Adsit, we account for the affective dimensions of our lived experiences in relation to contingency. Doe, Maisto, and Adsit examine the role of emotion in advocacy work of non-tenure-track faculty as well as the detriment of excluding affect in advocacy work. They explain how “activists may fixate on the outcomes of the movement, ignoring subtle but important shifts that have occurred and the emotional reorientations that have followed, both of which may be more difficult to identify and quantify than idealized outcomes. We are particularly interested in emotion both as a catalyst and as a reorientation” (214). Their work inspires us to use first-person pronouns and discuss the emotions we felt through the semester with regard to reading days. Despite the risks, we offer our stories to other academic workers in hopes that it provides an opportunity for discussion. In writing this article, we do not wish to criticize the individual decisions of our colleagues, peers, or institution with regard to how they handled reading days. We have all been faced with difficult decisions in the Covid-19 pandemic, and we made many judgment errors ourselves, as we explain in our narratives. We treat the Spring 2021 academic calendar changes as an opportunity to learn and reflect on a systemic culture of overwork, so that we can better resist marginalizing practices going forward.

### **Local Context**

On October 14, 2020, the Office of the Provost at our university sent out a university-wide email announcing that in order to prevent the spread of Covid-19, spring break would be replaced by five nonconsecutive reading days scattered throughout the Spring 2021 semester. The email explained that by joining the University of Michigan, Ohio State University, University of Iowa, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Purdue University, Georgia Institute of Technology, University of Florida, Indiana University, Boston University, Iowa State University, and Carnegie Mellon in the elimination of spring break, we could limit the spread of Covid-19 by reducing travel. After all, for several months in late 2020 and early 2021, our state was considered an epicenter of the virus in the United States, and the university went to great lengths to track and prevent the spread of Covid-19.

Our institution carries great responsibility for ensuring the safety of the community. As a university in a mid-sized city in the Southwestern United States, the university makes up approximately 9% of the population of the city, according to the university’s office of analytics and institutional research. We are a true borderland city located only 60 miles north of the US-Mexico border. Many of our students, staff, and faculty travel back and forth across the border regularly to visit family and attend to their physical and medical needs. As such, it was crucial for our

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

institution to take measures to limit the spread of Covid-19 by discouraging both domestic and international travel. Furthermore, as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and American Indian/Alaska Native Serving Institution (AI/ANSI), our university has a particular obligation to acknowledge and mitigate the disproportionate suffering that Latinx and Indigenous communities have experienced from the pandemic as a result of structures of racism and inequity. This, no doubt, affected the decision to cancel spring break, as university leadership could not allow sick students, staff, and faculty to carry the virus home.

With few exceptions in the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters, classes were held online, student services were provided remotely, and student dorms were monitored for infection rates through the wastewater drains in order to trace the virus as it moved through campus. After several months of lockdown, the community was worried about how to keep students from traveling home to see their families and carrying the virus back to the campus and local community. University leadership hoped the five reading days—one Tuesday, two Wednesdays, one Thursday, and a Friday—would “allow students and instructors to take needed breaks in the academic term...[while] allowing the same number of class meetings as would normally occur.” While the aim to reduce the spread of Covid-19 through travel was grounded in important public health best practices, replacing spring break with a series of reading days also had unintended consequences on instructors and staff, including early semester-burnout, additional unpaid working hours, and a general confusion about how to shift from spring break to reading days distributed over several weeks.

Perhaps most difficult about the switch to reading days was that many instructors struggled to incorporate the interspersed days off in their calendars. The semester began in mid-January, and as the first reading day drew near in February 2021, the Office of Instruction and Assessment shared a memo with faculty (which the Graduate College then forwarded to graduate student instructors) titled “Spring 2021 Week 6 Teaching Update.” Reading days were the subject of item number 3 in the email’s list of content:

The first reading day of the semester is Thursday, February 25! As a reminder, these days are intended to provide students (and instructors) a chance to disconnect from academic work, relax, and renew. For most classes, there should be no class meetings; no assignments or exams should be scheduled; and the following day should also be free of exams or high-stakes assessments. Here are some recommendations about honoring the intent of these days.

The last sentence linked to an undated, one-and-a-half-page PDF memo from the Office of Instruction and Assessment titled “Spring 2021 Reading Days Recommendations.” The memo included recommendations like

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

including the scheduled reading days in course syllabi, replacing high-stakes assessments with lower-stakes assessments or assignments, lightening students' load around the time of the cancelled spring break, being mindful of graduate students' grading loads, and encouraging students to take the reading days as true breaks.

Such recommendations acknowledge the kinds of struggles instructors and students faced. The suggestion to lighten students' load around the time of the cancelled spring break speaks to the recognition that students were experiencing burnout. The memo urged faculty to "keep in mind that students are feeling overwhelmed by all the class modalities and juggling school, jobs, and family life, as well as likely frustrated by the elimination of spring break. Your compassion and patience will be appreciated." Furthermore, asking faculty to remember that graduate teaching associates' "grading loads may be heavy during the week that was spring break" acknowledges that graduate students carry a heavier grading load than many of the professors that teach them, and administrators worry about overloading graduate students with more work. These acknowledgements of emotional and material struggles resonate with observations in the emerging scholarship on Covid-19 crisis communication at universities about the importance of what Liz Yeomans and Sarah Bowman call "emotionally sensitive leadership discourse in internal crisis communication" (210). However, by February, instructors had already published their syllabi, and many had already scheduled their content before receiving guidance. In short, educational workers—both instructors and the staff and leadership who support instruction—were operating in difficult conditions, and those constraints impacted pedagogical experiences in complex and interconnected ways.

Indeed, students also expressed concern about the shift to interspersed reading days. An undergraduate student started a petition on Change.org that garnered the attention of local news outlets. Among other arguments, the petition asks the university president to reinstate a traditional spring break because students rely on extended breaks "for stress relief as well as time to catch up on current courses that may have been hard to keep up with." The petition addresses how the pandemic and transition to online classes added to the typical stress of the semester, and students needed a spring break in 2021 more than ever. The petition raised more than 1700 signatures, and other students commented with reasons for supporting the petition. One student who signed the petition commented, "While recognizing that it's important to limit travel, spring break is one of few opportunities some of us have to see our families. Please don't make it so I won't be able to go home and see my little sisters at all for five months straight." Indeed, many students struggle with homesickness and isolation during their college experience, and this was already exacerbated by Covid-19. Another student shared, "Covid is not a reason to eliminate spring break, it's a reason to extend it. A midway break would increase student resilience and dedication in the last few weeks of

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

the academic year.” This comment resonates with our own arguments that academic breaks are important to creating a healthy learning environment.

### **Interconnected Overwork Experiences and Lessons**

Having situated the context of our institution’s shift from spring break to reading days, we now turn to analytical narratives of our own experiences. While our collaborative analysis is interwoven through both of our narratives, we begin with Kelli’s first-person account and follow with Ann’s first-person account, which is both informed by and in conversation with Kelli’s experiences and insights. We use this structure to recreate Ann’s experience of learning from Kelli’s insights to become more critically aware of positionality and power, because Ann’s learning moment catalyzed our argument for the importance of resisting the culture of overwork in interactions with graduate students specifically.

#### *Kelli*

While reading days impacted me in my various roles as a student, graduate administrator, and instructor, I felt the pain first as a student. I first realized the reading days were a problem when I started looking at the semester schedules in my classes. Two of my graduate seminars met on Monday, and we had not been granted any Monday reading days. It meant that for half of my classes, I did not get a break at all. While the email we received in October from the Office of the Provost assured me that we would have the same number of days in-class, it did not account for one-day-per-week classes. For these classes, not only did reading days eliminate any sort of break, they increased the semester by a week—we had an extra week’s worth of reading and assignments.

Despite the memo encouraging instructors to account for the reading days in their syllabi, my professors did not have the reading days marked on their course calendars. Though a few of my classes only met once a week, we still had assignments and peer review responses due on reading days. I felt intimidated to remind my instructors that they should not require assignments on those days. At one point, I emailed my instructor with the Office of Instruction and Assessment recommendations regarding the reading days, asking for them to allocate another day for writing conferences. I felt a lot of anxiety at this moment, hoping they would not misinterpret my tone as pushy or lazy. Their solution was to offer an additional day for writing conferences, that way students could take the reading day off if they wanted to. Who wouldn’t want to?

Though my professors accommodated my requests to shift due dates, I struggled to convince them to reduce the number of assignments in order to allow us to take the days off. At one point, I sat in a Zoom session explaining to my whole class how I needed more time to write, and I couldn’t keep up. One instructor remarked that I would have to be more diligent about avoiding procrastination. As a very studious and disciplined student, I took this remark personally. I have a processing disorder which

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

impacts my reading, so I always have to schedule my study and reading time in an agenda each week. How could an instructor mistake this institutional logistics issue with judgment about the character of their students? Another instructor told the class that they gave their undergraduate students a week off, but they lamented that giving us time off would eliminate important content they'd planned—content we would need in our careers.

In a normal semester, I would never take a spring break to begin with. In fact, spring break was when I often had time to sit down and start working on my term papers. Graduate students often have the first drafts of term papers due right after spring break, and this is when I could sit down without getting distracted by emails and discussion boards. I'd review key readings and start making notes about how to connect them to my research. I would also use spring break to catch up on grading. By not having a break, I found myself searching for more time to write. During a normal semester, I would take Saturdays off from work and school to be with my partner. During Spring 2021, I worked 7 days per week to account for extra coursework in my classes. I felt the end-of-semester burnout much faster. My position as both an instructor and student led me to analyze the consequences of overwork.

In response to the shift to reading days, the English Graduate Union, a graduate student advocacy group, met in January and February to discuss how to protect ourselves from overwork. None of our instructors had received training on how to enact reading days, and we were eager to create some resources and guidelines. We determined it was in our best interest to remind our professors not to schedule assignments or conferences for reading days. We gathered the documents, such as the memo described above, in defense of preserving our days off. We also talked about what to do if our instructors continued to require work during the reading days. Who could we report non-compliance to? The university had not considered creating outlets for students to advocate for themselves in the event that instructors did not know how to implement reading days. As instructors ourselves, we became suddenly aware of the nuances of academic power dynamics. The problems with overwork didn't just develop from the administrative decisions; they also emerged from a culture among teachers. If we wanted those days to be breaks for us, we also had to be diligent about preserving the breaks for our own students.

As graduate instructors, we were double-taxed by the lack of a break. We were expected to take on research projects during our "time off" while also tending to the emotional and intellectual needs of our students. Luckily, I had a course release during Spring 2021, and I was not the instructor of record for any classes. However, I was working as a supplemental instructor for online English classes. In order to help another instructor, I met with their students in bi-weekly writing conferences. Early in the semester I met with the core instructor and asked how they'd like me to handle the reading days in their online class. They remarked

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

how it was a hassle to incorporate the reading days into their class. First, they were teaching out of a pre-designed 7-week class, and it would be hard to adjust the course to accommodate the intermittent days off. They also noted how the course operated asynchronously. Though dues dates were scheduled for Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, the instructor noted how students have the freedom to choose their study schedules. As such, they did not have to work on the reading days if they did not want to. Hawkins, Manzi, and Ojeda’s notion of the neoliberal academic “‘free’ subject,” as noted above, allowed us to justify maintaining the high workload, and the inflexibility of pre-designed courses dissuaded us from changing the course calendar. Having worked with pre-designed courses, I empathized with this teacher’s reasoning. As a student myself, I was more conflicted. I wanted to give these students a day off. In the end, I suggested adding Saturday conferences to account for the missing day in the week.

Looking back, I realize instructors—myself included—often do not regard spring break as a break at all. In a typical semester of teaching composition 1 or 2, I had often asked students to turn in a final draft of a writing assignment over the break. While they would have already written a draft and received feedback, I was still asking them for their attention. For the students who are punctual with their work and do not face any extenuating circumstances, it’s such little work to ask of them. However, I’d never before considered how asking students to work over spring break impacted the students who fall behind or need to work ahead. I’ve started to wonder if I expect my students to sacrifice bits of their spring break because I am expected to sacrifice spring break myself. The culture of academia seems to valorize overwork, or at a minimum treat it like a rite of passage. In retrospect, I understand how expecting students to complete assignments over spring break disproportionately places marginalized students at risk. Taking breaks is important for mental health, as students pointed out in their critiques of the institution’s decision. As the student comments on the petition against reading days reveal, students also need breaks for stress relief and to catch up on courses. They need breaks to spend time with their families. And they need breaks to bolster resilience.

Rhetoric of excellence penetrates our personal decisions about how to account for the reading days through internal metrics that quantify “excellence.” Graduate assistants are often measured by tenure standards in the name of career preparation. Though the adage “you are students first” persists, graduate workers often still choose to balance teaching, research, and service in hopes of obtaining a tenure-line job after graduation. There’s an unspoken expectation that as a graduate student I should be publishing one article per year, attending at least one conference per year, teaching two classes without the help of a grader or supplemental instructor, and keeping up with all of my own coursework.

Contingent faculty, pre-tenure faculty, and graduate instructors often serve on various boards and as chairs of sub-committees in addition to their teaching duties in order to demonstrate commitment to the

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry* 6.1 (2022)

department. Indeed, the many academic labor scholars before us point out it's often unclear how to distinguish between types of contracts and obligations. Melonçon, Mechenbier, and Wilson describe how they struggled in their research to determine the roles of different faculty members because their titles were not listed in public-facing documents: "This issue of visibility is more acute for adjunct faculty (those teaching on term-to-term contracts) than it is for [full-time, non-tenure-track] faculty. So at the very start of our research...simply being 'invisible' at their institution would be a main factor affecting contingent faculty work conditions" (13). The erasure of differences in the normalization of (raced, gendered, classed, abled) tenure-track expectations is what leads institutions to expect contingent workers will operate on the same expectations as tenure-track employees, regardless of pay, years of experience, or contractual roles. And while this impacts contingent workers of all identities, Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality draws our attention to the ways in which contingent workers of marginalized identities are uniquely dis-privileged in an institutional culture of overwork.

As Bartlett Wilson and Smith note, our work expectations are always defined in the shadow of tenure-track expectations: "With tenure-line faculty's work set as the norm in higher education, contingent faculty's work, which varies based on local job descriptions, campus policies, and institutional practices, can certainly look odd or wrong—if it is noticed at all" (173). Their study examines the different ways contingent faculty meet the expectations of teaching, research, and service, regardless of their contractual obligations. While Bartlett Wilson and Smith's study focuses on contingent faculty, it's certainly true of labor in many roles, including pre-tenure faculty and graduate students across campus. In many English departments, graduate student instructors teach as many classes as tenure-track professors, and they often teach courses with higher course caps. They are also juggling their dissertations and coursework. It is one thing to prepare junior scholars for the work they may face ahead of them, but where do we draw the line between practice and overwork? There's no policy regarding graduate students and their service, but it's the cultural practice that has been handed down to us through processes like annual reviews and the tenure portfolio.

Given the restrictions on travel, everyone experienced lulls in their curriculum vitae from their inability to attend conferences and workshops. Many academics could not collect field research or struggled to balance their personal lives with publishing. Especially during the pandemic, I felt compelled to demonstrate excellence as a teacher and researcher, though many of our typical outlets were unavailable. It's this pressure that so easily allows us to erase our days off. I can sometimes set hard boundaries for my students, but a fear creeps in about setting work boundaries for myself. This culture of overwork will not end when the

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

pandemic is over unless we reflect on how rhetoric of excellence impacts our varying roles.

*Ann*

As a pre-tenure faculty member, I often think about the impacts of a culture of overwork through the prism of my individual experience as I strive to build a successful case for tenure. At the time of writing this article, I was just four years removed from being a graduate student myself, and I still strongly identified with the ways that rhetoric of excellence and the academic culture of meritocracy shape the experiences of graduate students. While the stakes are undeniably different (specifically, less contingent and less materially dire) for pre-tenure faculty, Patricia Welsh Droz and Lorie Stagg Jacobs point out that “for untenured faculty, to actively resist the bureaucratic nature of the corporatized university is the fastest way to lose a good job. And yet succumbing fully to the pressures of the fast lane may result in sacrificing a quality life outside academia” (65). But the process of sharing and co-analyzing lived experiences with Kelli has revealed to me that when I succumb to the pressures of the fast lane, I am not the only one who feels the impacts. I realized that I tend to focus more on the ways I am impacted by a culture of overwork and less on the ways I perpetuate and pass on the impacts to my students and colleagues, especially those who are contingent and marginalized.

I trace the emergence of this realization over the course of our collaboration on this project, which began in conversations Kelli and I had while we worked together on a Spring 2021 independent study to support Kelli’s work in documentary and participatory video-based storytelling. We met periodically through the semester, and as we caught up at the beginning of our meetings, our conversation often turned to our experiences with the spring academic calendar changes because we were both teaching undergraduates, and Kelli was also taking graduate courses. As Kelli shared with me many of the experiences she describes in her narrative above, my immediate instinct was to empathize and commiserate from a place of identifying with experiences of contingency (as a relatively recent graduate and as untenured faculty)—and less from a place of recognizing my relative privilege and the ways in which what I say and do set precedents and expectations (however unintended) for the graduate students I work with.

Like Kelli, I felt the impact of the reading days in my teaching, and this was a point of connection and commiseration for us. I taught two asynchronous online classes (one 16-week and one 7-week) in Spring 2021, and because these classes did not have meeting days, but rather weekly modules and deadlines, I struggled to recreate the experience of a break. But I had prior asynchronous teaching experience, and I leveraged that experience to inform my approach to reading days. I planned my course content so that weeks with reading days did not have a major submission deadline, and I noted reading days in the course schedule and

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

in weekly modules. I made sure that no assignment submissions, high-stakes or low-stakes, were due on a reading day. Following the recommendations from the Office of Instruction and Assessment memo (which we described above), I sent my students a message the week of the first reading day acknowledging that I, too, found the reading days a challenge, sharing my process for honoring reading days, and reaffirming my commitment throughout the term, regardless of reading days, to flexibility with deadlines. But as the weeks with reading days came and went, I was surprised by how un-break-like they felt, both for me and for students who shared their experiences with me. I pondered the language from the administration's messaging about reading days: "a chance to disconnect from academic work, relax, and renew." Not one of the reading days felt like that to me, especially since I continued to receive emails and meeting requests from colleagues and students on reading days, and the "pressures of the fast lane" that Droz and Jacobs describe (65) often compelled me to engage instead of disconnect.

I shared frankly about this pressure in my conversations with Kelli, thinking I was empathizing with the experience of feeling pressured to work on reading days, when in fact I was reinforcing the culture of overwork in active and passive ways: actively by portraying it as unavoidable and passively by letting my approach serve as a model and precedent (however unintended). For example, I could have put an away message on my email on reading days, but I was more guided by the anxiety I feel as an untenured faculty member about putting an away message on my email, even during summers and especially during a semester. Like Droz and Jacobs, I feel guilty about any decisions that might detract from "giving our students the good education they paid for," despite the fact that, as Droz and Jacobs also point out, more is not always better for students or for faculty (68).

In my case, I assumed it would be unfair to students—especially those juggling classes, work, health issues, and caregiving—to ignore their messages on reading days in an asynchronous class where quick and thorough responses to student messages during the work week are crucial to my pedagogical strategy. I also knew that responsiveness was specifically assessed and rewarded in student evaluations for online courses, and student evaluations are an important part of my tenure case. Still, by encouraging students to "take the reading days as true breaks," per the administration's guidance, but then responding to individual messages and publicly engaging in work on that day myself, I was undermining my own encouragement by not practicing what I preached—not only for my undergraduate students, but also for the graduate students I work with, including Kelli.

In addition to sharing my anxiety about being available to students with Kelli, I also shared with her that I was afraid to decline a late-semester reading day meeting about collaborating on building a new interdisciplinary graduate certificate because I'd been looped into the

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

conversation by a senior tenured colleague. It was Kelli’s encouragement and sharing of her own experiences in one of our meetings about this project that inspired me to decline the meeting and acknowledge to myself that the reading day meeting was not the only problem. The collaboration itself was beyond my capacity at that point, since I was already directing a newly launched and still-being-built-out undergraduate major, minor, and certificate; working with graduate students in my home program; and co-leading a user experience professional organization of campus-wide students, staff, and faculty, as well as practitioners and community members outside the university. I declined the meeting and felt no immediate negative impacts, despite my worries. While I am grateful to Kelli for her wisdom and graciousness, I also recognize that she was in the position of performing emotional labor on behalf of someone with more privilege and power. Not only did my own habits of overwork—in this case, a difficulty with saying no to project collaboration requests—serve to normalize overwork because of my position of relative privilege, but they also created more labor for the person I thought I was merely commiserating with.

Here again, by initially portraying this administrative labor request as non-optional, I reified a culture of overwork in which graduate students and pre-tenure and contingent faculty feel pressure to accept administrative and service responsibilities beyond their contractual obligations. As Hawkins, Manzi, and Ojeda explain, neoliberalism creates a “market” of competition in academic processes and practices by which we compare ourselves, with fewer positions and opportunities and increased responsibilities and pressures (334). The institutional culture of overwork is built on the concept that excellence requires self-sacrifice, such as taking on extra labor in the name of “service.” Such service creeps into our personal lives and can take over our weekends, holidays, and academic breaks. Mechenbier, Wilson, and Melonçon explain that the concept of doing service often means doing work as a self-sacrifice for the greater good. Like “excellence,” service is often undefined and slippery. While the vagueness can be leveraged for good to encourage educational workers to proactively define service in ways that allow them to get credit for the work they are doing, it can also be a slippery slope to overload. Well-meaning supervisors and mentors are quick to point out opportunities that would look good on a resume—things that might help us get promoted or help with annual reviews, but the power dynamics can make those suggestions feel more like directions. Furthermore, as contingent employment at the university becomes more predominant, graduate students and pre-tenure and contingent faculty are concerned about whether or not their service record is adequate to make them competitive on the market. Academic breaks then become a prime place on the calendar for accommodating “service creep,” even when our institution and colleagues encourage us to disconnect.

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

In reflecting on my experience and learning from Kelli's experience, I recognize that my own ingrained habits of overwork, many of which were rooted in my anxiety about building a successful tenure case, contributed to the un-break-like experience of reading days—not only for me, but also for the students I work with, especially graduate students like Kelli. The temporal and career-stage proximity that I have, as an early-career untenured faculty member, to graduate students tempts me to identify too strongly with their experiences of contingency at the expense of recognizing my own privilege, and in attempting to empathize, I can do harm by inappropriately equating experiences without acknowledging power differences. Furthermore, my temporal and career-stage proximity to graduate students also makes what I say and do function as a defacto (if also unnamed) precedent and expectation for what graduate students should do, especially for those working toward academic careers. And because I am a multiply-privileged white faculty member, normalizing expectations based on what I do also centers raced, classed, gendered, and abled privilege since, as Hawkins, Manzi, and Ojeda observe, notions of what constitutes a “good scholar” are often “deeply informed by masculine, white, middle-class and anglocentric ideals” (342). This is particularly true when people who are white and male comprise the majority of tenure-track faculty, and their practices and ideals are thus normalized in the institution. Indeed, at our institution, 70.5% of tenure-track faculty are white and 63.1% are male, according to the university's office of analytics and institutional research.

Given my positionality as a multiply-privileged white woman in a tenure-track position, I have to acknowledge the complexity of my reading day experiences. On the one hand, the difficulty of “disconnecting” on days interspersed through a long, asynchronous teaching semester was real, and the pressure to overachieve as a pre-tenure faculty member was (and is) also real. On the other hand, my multiply-privileged positionality affords me protections and choices, and I am responsible for my participation in overwork and its impacts on the interconnected educational worker community—and especially those with less privilege and power. Participating in overwork does not only affect me; it also affects the undergraduate and graduate students I work with and other/future junior faculty for whom my actions set a tacit precedent.

### **Strategies for Resisting Overwork in Academic Breaks and Calendar Changes**

We both want to emphasize the impacts of a culture of overwork in our difficulties with setting workplace boundaries about when, where, and how we will work, especially as they relate to academic breaks and changes to academic calendars. As we describe above, we both felt the pressure to work during the reading days as a way to demonstrate our commitment to our various roles. Though working and studying during the designated break days were optional, the cultural expectation persisted

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

through the idea that good teachers stay available and good students plan their work wisely in order to get everything done because the pressures of overwork were present long before the pandemic.

We also want to emphasize how the naming of breaks can exacerbate longstanding pressures of overwork. In our case, the university’s decision to call the dispersed spring break days “reading days” contributed to the dissonance we experienced with our institution’s encouragement to “relax and renew.” We associate reading days with the days leading up to final exams. Though classes are not scheduled, students often use this time to study, to read, and to write. For instructors, these are often the days we schedule meetings, meet with students during office hours, and send out grade updates before final projects and exams. For the members of the university community with intersecting roles, reading days carry multiple burdens, so using that particular name for the days that replaced spring break amplified an underlying culture of overwork that was further exacerbated by the realities of living and working in the second year of an ongoing global pandemic.

Therefore, while the frustration of reading days was (hopefully) short-lived for us, the elimination of spring break revealed to us how the culture of overwork in the academy is deeply-rooted. Even as instructors, we both reflect back on times before Covid-19 when we overstepped spring break by asking students to complete assignments over the break. While they were generally smaller assignments, such as making revisions after a peer review, we were nonetheless guilty of perpetuating the expectations that students should be constantly engaged in their schoolwork. Even if we cannot completely address how neoliberalism creates a hostile, competitive environment for academic workers, we have the power to protect our students from having that pressure placed back onto them. As we discovered through our experiences, resisting the culture of overwork requires that we are more aware of the importance of breaks and how they are structured.

While we have acknowledged the understandable limitations of institutional messaging about reading days during difficult circumstances, we also want to acknowledge the labor of our colleagues in the Office of Instruction and Assessment. The memo we referenced earlier from the Office of Online Instruction and Assessment provided practical and helpful advice for intentionally framing breaks in the future, including one-off holidays. In the list below, we pass along the helpful suggestions from our institution and add ideas from our own experiences and reflections for how to create space for true breaks in our teaching and leadership:

- Include the scheduled break in the syllabus and explain how you adjusted the assignments to accommodate this day.
- Replace a few, high-stakes assessments with more frequent, lower-stakes assessments or assignments.

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

- Regularly check in with students about mid-semester exams and/or major assignments in other classes.
- Keep in mind that graduate assistants' grading loads may be heavy during the weeks of fall and/or spring breaks.
- Encourage students to take academic breaks as true breaks, to the extent possible.
- Avoid scheduling exams on the day following a break or holiday.
- Communicate regularly with your students to ask them how they are doing and what would help them be successful in your course.
- When coursework loads are high (i.e., around finals), assign students some reflective learning activities rather than labor-intensive projects.
- If you have regular assignment due dates, and a holiday, reading day, or break falls on your due date, adjust the due dates to a later date.
- When students might generally have to work during academic breaks to catch up in their classes, schedule catch-up days in your calendar instead.
- For administrators, include regular messaging to encourage instructors to create space for academic breaks in their course designs and interactions with colleagues and students.
- For educational workers with more privilege and power, intentionally model boundary-setting practices against overwork at your administrative and tenure levels.
- For faculty who work with graduate students, name and model an intentional approach to academic breaks in your own practices and support graduate students in doing the same.

Perhaps our most important takeaway from the Spring 2021 reading days experience is the realization that educational workers in positions of privilege and power need to be aware of and intentional about the framing of all academic breaks, both in word and in practice, and especially in the case of crisis-necessitated academic calendar changes. As we observed, the naming of breaks themselves are consequential: “reading days” evoked a prior frame of reference involving end-of-term cramming instead of disconnecting and relaxing, which created dissonance with our institution’s efforts to promote rest and balance. And this was all the more intensified during a crisis-necessitated academic calendar change in the second year of a global pandemic. Indeed, we hope the increased attention to student and faculty well-being that arose from the extraordinarily difficult circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic will continue beyond the crisis.

And even when our academic calendars and breaks are relatively “normal,” we need to attend to and resist a culture of overwork at the institutional level. Resisting an institutional culture of overwork—and the harm it does to all academic workers, especially those who are contingent

*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 6.1 (2022)*

and marginalized—requires an ongoing commitment to replacing tacit norms that are rooted in academic rank privilege, as well as race, gender, class, ability, and other identity privileges, with intentionally framed and enacted best practices for academic breaks. All educational workers—and especially those with more privilege and power—can commit to creating space for academic breaks by communicating about breaks and expectations with students, acknowledging how different intersecting identities are impacted by academic norms, and modeling resistance to a culture of overwork.

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*Academic Labor: Research and Artistry* 6.1 (2022)

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