

Rewriting Labor in Composition

Meridith Reed

McClure, Randall, Dayna V. Goldstein, and Michael A. Pemberton, eds. *Labored: The State(ment) and Future of Work in Composition*. Parlor Press, 2017. 344 pages.

Labor issues are integral to composition as a field. In many ways, the practice of teaching writing has been defined by the labor conditions in which the practice occurs. In her 1991 book, *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*, Susan Miller traces the ways in which composition's origins as a female-dominated "service" discipline have shaped composition's attempts to re-identify itself as masculine and scientific. The field has worked to move past the image of the "sad women in the basement" (Miller 121) to a new image of professionalized, tenured, research-focused scholars who are shaping a serious academic discipline. And yet, the general trend in higher education towards more and more contingent faculty and composition's ongoing need to staff many sections of writing courses means that exploited contingent laborers still permeate the field of composition. Randall McClure, Dayna V. Goldstein, and Michael A. Pemberton's edited collection *Labored: The State(ment) and Future of Work in Composition* addresses these concerns directly and proposes ways to update our field's professional statements to respond to current trends like adjunct online teaching, diverse institution types and student bodies, and fewer tenured and tenure-track lines.

The chapters in this collection are all built around the 1989 *Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing*, which argued for improved labor conditions for college writing instructors, particularly contingent faculty and graduate instructors. The *Statement* was a response to the 1986 Wyoming Conference on English, where a graduate student stood and described the ways she and her first-year students were oppressed; then, she asked, "Why aren't you all talking about this?" (8). Her emotional question struck a chord, and soon attendees of the confer-

ence had drafted the Wyoming Resolution, a statement advocating for fair pay and working conditions for contingent faculty, avenues for exploited instructors to share grievances, and censures for noncompliant institutions. Three years later, CCCC developed their 1989 *Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing*, a statement which was immediately met with controversy. As Jeanne Gunner writes in her chapter, “Elegy for a *Statement*,” many “whose voices the *Resolution* represented” were angered by the *Statement* which they felt was “a revisionist document—already, in fact, a recension—that served the professional self-interest of the academically privileged” (54).

Although the *Statement* was updated in 2013, McClure, Goldstein, and Pemberton argue the update “deemphasizes labor issues and focuses instead on pedagogical best practices” (xix), thus moving away from the purpose of the original statement and the *Wyoming Resolution* which sparked it. The hope of their collection is to “open up this discussion” and “lead to improved working conditions for all writing teachers” (xix). And, indeed, this collection is not timid about addressing the ongoing labor issues in composition, including working conditions for contingent faculty, the lack of recognition of writing center professionals (see chapter 3 “My War on the CCCC *Statement*” by Valerie Balester), and the challenges inherent in being a junior writing program administrator (see chapter 6 “The jWPA: Caught Between the Promises of Portland and Laramie” by Timothy R. Dougherty).

The book is divided in three sections: the first recounts and reflects on the creation of the *Statement*, the second explores how the *Statement* measures up (or not) with current labor conditions in the field, and the third explicitly examines ways to revisit and revise the *Statement* now. The collection contains a variety of perspectives on composition’s complicated labor issues, creating a productive tension that is perhaps best exemplified in an early chapter by Chris Anson, entitled “I Stand Here Ironing.”¹ He writes an imaginary dialogue formatted as an exchange between two competing voices as the speaker “stands here ironing.” Both voices are Anson’s in the sense that they draw on his personal knowledge and experience of the field, but the tormented and often sharp dialogue makes clear just how complex the issues of labor are in composition and emphasizes the professional divide between tenured and non-tenure track faculty’s concerns, situations, and identities.

The competing voices of the collection are also apparent in two chapters that appear side-by-side in the section on current labor conditions in the field. In their chapter, “A State of Permanent Contingency: Writing Programs, Hiring Practices, and a Persistent Breach of Ethics,” Casie J. Fedukovich, Susan Miller-Cochran, Brent Simoneaux, and Robin Snead argue

that the CCCC Writing Program Certificate of Excellence, by “awarding the status of ‘Program of Excellence’ to schools that still rely overwhelmingly on underpaid, time-poor contingent labor,” ultimately “normalizes and promotes practices against which many in the discipline are stringently fighting” (139). For Fedukovich et al., the solution may be a “path to tenure for faculty with a focus on teaching” (143) and “a move away from a state of permanent contingency” (144). In contrast, in “Contingency, Access, and the Material Conditions of Teaching and Learning in the Statement,” Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano believe that “the *Statement* is out of line with the practical realities of modern American writing instruction” (147–48). They propose that the field recognize the reality that most graduates of MA and PhD programs in English who stay in academia will end up teaching writing courses in the two-year college system where contingency is the norm. Rather than emphasizing the unlikely and idealized standards of wide-spread tenure lines, Hassel and Giordano argue that the field’s organizations should instead create standards that professionalize non-tenure-track and part-time positions and address the realities of the working conditions of most of the field’s writing instructors. They also note the importance of effective graduate pedagogy education and ongoing professional development for writing instructors. Since most graduate students, whether their emphasis is in American literature, creative writing, film, or folklore, will end up teaching writing courses in their academic careers, Hassel and Giordano encourage us to ask how well our field is preparing them for the work they will actually do. It is an important and underexplored question.

One of the most compelling pieces in the collection is the first chapter by Susan Wyche, the anonymous graduate student who stood at the Wyoming Conference and shared her powerful tale of exploitation at her institution. In this chapter, Wyche recounts the difficult labor conditions that drove her to tearfully share her experiences in Wyoming, including low pay, a course overload without appropriate compensation, lack of resources and support, and unhelpful administration. After existing in the field’s consciousness for so long as the “anonymous graduate student,” Wyche’s perspective and voice are a welcome addition to the conversation. She writes that working conditions “must be re-engaged as a mainstream issue for all campuses, and all disciplines” (12) and notes that it may be “time for the ‘anonymous’ teachers of institutions today to speak out about the new realities of teaching and learning in postsecondary writing, in league with their fellow workers in other disciplines” (13). Her call for composition teachers to speak out about the realities of their teaching environments is an important one in a scholarly discipline whose published scholarship and administrative decision-making come primarily from tenure-line faculty.

A key theme that emerges across the collection is the need for professional development for writing faculty, including adequate training in the teaching of writing for graduate students and ongoing engagement in the field's research and conversations for experienced writing faculty. As Barry Maid and Barbara D'Angelo write in their chapter, "Recognizing Realities," writing teacher "expertise must be dynamic" and involve a "continuous cycle of professional development" as well as "regular review" (197). They propose an accreditation approach that articulates outcomes for working conditions that can be externally evaluated and assessed (206). Alice S. Horning, in "A Focus on Reading as an Essential Component of the Next *Statement*," argues that composition instructors are reading teachers as well as writing teachers, and, as such, even "graduate students, part-timers, and untenured faculty who teach writing need professional development equivalent to that provided for full-time faculty" (220), especially in teaching reading skills. In the afterword to the collection, Joseph Harris emphasizes that "sweeping calls for tenure are less realistic than nostalgic" and that writing programs must acknowledge that they "depend on the good work of teachers who will never be considered for tenure" (286). This means fair wages, appropriate resources, and ongoing professional development for the instructors who provide the bulk of undergraduate writing instruction in the US.

Importantly, several authors also point to the changes in labor conditions wrought by technological advancement. In her chapter, "Rethinking the 'Legitimate' Reasons for Hiring Adjunct Faculty," Evelyn Beck points out that online courses have allowed online adjunct faculty to adopt a more entrepreneurial and independent spirit, having the freedom to choose when and where to work. The growing demand for online writing instruction also presents some of these faculty with the ability to negotiate some aspects of their working conditions. Beck acknowledges that there are still unresolved labor issues for online adjunct faculty (including institutional isolation) but suggests that revisions to the *Statement* should recognize that "some adjunct faculty view themselves as entrepreneurs and have fashioned a flexible professional life worthy of respect" (183). Beck's argument is reinforced by another chapter in the collection: in "Going Digital" James P. Purdy notes that digital scholarship and digital pedagogy constitute an important subfield of composition, and yet online writing instruction itself is often marginalized and seen as "peripheral to the field." He proposes that a revised *Statement* account for "how digital technologies have changed and enhanced opportunities for widespread, instantaneous, and global written communication" (239), and that both students and instructors be adequately prepared and supported for learning and teaching in digital environments.

One weakness of this collection is also a weakness of research throughout our field: although some of the authors here come from the ranks of contingent faculty and graduate students, the majority of the essays are authored by tenured faculty. The *Statement* came to be because a graduate student shared publicly how she was being exploited by her institution; in the spirit of that original exigence, this collection would have benefited from more research, stories, and arguments by contingent faculty and graduate instructors. At the same time, *Labored* does acknowledge the difficulty inherent in marginalized faculty speaking out on labor conditions. Susan Wyche emphasizes that her identification as an “anonymous graduate student” in the original discussions swirling around the *Wyoming Resolution* and the *Statement* was an attempt to protect her from facing negative consequences from her institution if she were identified by name. Fedukovich et al. also acknowledge the risk that contingent faculty may face by participating in “Explicit, public, detailed discussions of salaries and working conditions” and that “Anonymity is crucial in situations where employment can be terminated at-will” (140). Besides this risk, there may be other reasons why more contingent voices are not present in the current volume, including the fact that contingent faculty often face lack of time and resources for research writing, carry heavy teaching loads, and have a sense of not being a professional in the field (see Penrose). Whatever the reason, the absence of their individual voices is felt as contingent faculty again become primarily a group that is written about rather than a strong voice in their own conversation.

Despite this flaw, the collection is a significant and needed contribution to the literature on labor issues in composition. Perhaps the greatest contribution of this collection comes in the closing chapter and appendix by the editors, McClure, Goldstein, and Pemberton, who examine why a long history of conversations and statements in the field about labor conditions have not, by and large, resulted in improved working conditions for contingent faculty. They propose that the problem lies in composition’s reliance on qualitative research and resistance to quantitative research, a problem that has been identified by many other scholars in the field (see Anson; Haswell; Howard). This preference for the qualitative over the quantitative “has left the discipline vulnerable to legislative and administrative decisions that tend to be based largely on quantitative data” (McClure, Goldstein, and Pemberton 271). Writing as a discipline must use the most persuasive means and data to enact the working conditions that we know lead to better outcomes for both instructors and students. McClure, Goldstein, and Pemberton demonstrate with exhaustive annotations to the *Statement* that much valuable quantitative data already exists: data that could help make arguments

in favor of improved working conditions. But they note that further quantitative work, especially work on the relationship between contingent labor working conditions and quality of instruction, remains to be done.

Another valuable contribution of this book is its clear call to action. In addition to the editors' call for more quantitative data that can be used to argue for better working conditions, nearly every chapter makes specific recommendations for changes to the wording and content of the *Statement* (some even drafting sample paragraphs of what these revisions might look like). At the end of an early chapter, one voice in Chris Anson's dialogue asks another to "stop reflecting, back and forth with the iron, and do something!" This collection is a clear call to *do something* about the pressing labor issues that continue to haunt our work as researchers and teachers of writing. One hopes that this fine collection will result in the kind of changes to labor conditions for marginalized faculty that have so far largely eluded composition as a field.

NOTE

1. The title is a reference to the Tillie Olsen short story, "I Stand Here Ironing," about a mother grappling with her guilt over whether she could have been a better parent to her oldest daughter. The story ends on a hopeful note that the daughter will find her way despite the mistakes and regrets of her mother.

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Meridith Reed is assistant professor of English at Brigham Young University. Her research interests include writing program administration and writing pedagogy education.