Book Review

Organizing Efforts and Reforming Exploitative Labor Practices in Writing Programs

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Kahn, Seth, William B. Lalicker, and Amy Lynch-Biniek, editors. *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition.* The WAC Clearinghouse / U of Colorado P, 2017, wac.colostate.edu/docs/books/contingency/collection.pdf. 334 pages.

It is no secret that slim budgets and economic pressures have led to exploitative labor practices in American colleges and universities. Institutional pressures demand that writing programs prepare students for academic, civic, and professional work, yet institutions provide few resources to support the educators doing this work. In response to increasingly diminished labor conditions for composition faculty, organizations such as the New Faculty Majority aim to expose these unfair practices and advocate for reform. The Council of Writing Program Administrators, too, actively engages with redefining fair labor practices for writing program administrator (WPA) positions; for example, the 1992 *Portland Resolution* states that, "The WPA should be a regular, full-time, tenured member or a full-time administrator" (Hult et al. 1). In 2016, Anicca Cox et al. published *The Indianapolis Resolution: Responding to Twenty-First-Century Exigencies/Political Economies of Composition Labor*, in which they write, "there exists a dearth of support for creation, publication, and dissemination of research into labor and its effects on teaching" (39). CCCC has also engaged in advocacy, as articulated through the 2016 *CCCC Statement on Working Conditions for Non-Tenure-Track Writing Faculty*. Although the exploitation of writing faculty is well documented and our field's efforts to reform are vast, unethical labor practices continue to haunt our profession.

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Entering the discussion of the exploitation of writing faculty, Kahn et al.'s edited collection *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition* aims to build solidarity across ranks. In the introduction, the editors write that "this collection addresses the [labor] situation by highlighting alternatives to the hollow and horrific, to the anger and despair; we compile and present efforts that have led concretely and effectively toward improved adjunct faculty working conditions" (Kahn et al. 6–7). This collection shares stories that suggest ways to reshape contingent faculty positions and perhaps gain solidarity within and across writing programs.

In the introduction, Kahn et al. offer key terms, state the collection's purpose, and explain ways to navigate the essays using the "threads" which "connect arguments across chapters" (10). Chapters in the "Self-Advocacy" thread focus on contingent faculty advocating for themselves and may be useful for contingent-faculty working with tenure-track and tenured faculty. Chapters within the "Organizing Within and Across Ranks" thread may speak to WPAs, as these chapters describe strategies for alliance-building between faculty members of different ranks. Also of interest to WPAs are chapters in the third thread, "Professionalizing and Developing in Complex Contexts," as these chapters connect the issues of labor exploitation to the denigration of composition and describe the implications of an un-/under-professionalized or non-specialized writing faculty. Chapters in the fourth thread, "Local Changes to Workload, Pay, and Material Conditions," share stories of tangible changes in local contexts, while chapters in the fifth thread, "Protecting Gains, Telling Cautionary Tales," temper the victories described in the fourth thread. The threads connect arguments across chapters and offer WPAs and other readers an efficient way to locate chapters.

Because of the diversity of the collection's contributors, *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity* offers a broad view of the labor reform efforts across multiple college writing programs. Each chapter is written from a different vantage point, as chapter authors include contingent faculty such as graduate students, part-time instructors, full-time non-tenure-track instructors, lecturers, WPAs, writing center directors, and tenure-track faculty. The authors' different perspectives offer readers of varying backgrounds possible approaches to fighting labor exploitation in their contexts. Further, the inclusion of diverse voices helps the collection to achieve both specificity of detail and breadth of coverage, inviting readers to recognize their own experiences in these authors' stories. The book's project, after all, is "less about envisioning a utopia" since, as the editors write, "we don't all agree on what that utopia looks like" (7), and the disparate voices presented

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in the collection remind readers of the futility of a one-size-fits-all solution to labor exploitation, instead encouraging readers to localize these stories to their own institutions.

Compelling examples of writing program administrators seeking change in their own institutions may be found throughout the book. For example, in chapter one, "Silent Subversion, Quiet Competence, and Patient Persistence," Carol Lind, a non-tenure-track faculty member (NTTF) from Illinois State University, and Joan Mullin, then department chair at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, describe an English department they once shared in which over half of NTTF had terminal degrees (MFAs or PhDs) but were allocated no resources to pursue professional development. NTTF expressed their desire to teach courses based not only on departmental needs but on their own expertise. As a result of conversations among Mullin, Lind, and the NTTF, Mullin proposed the creation of a course reassignment award process so NTTF could apply for a course release to redesign a course in their area of expertise, with one award available each semester. By describing a department chair and NTTF working across ranks, this chapter serves as a compelling model for change and shows how reforming NTTF working conditions can benefit faculty, students, and the department at large.

Whereas chapter one focuses on professionalization opportunities for NTTF, chapter two describes a highly professionalized contingent labor force that upper administrators reclassified as contingent and how a new WPA responded. This chapter, "Despair is Not a Strategy" by Anna K. Nardo and Barbara Heifferon, is written from the perspective of a WPA and former department chair and includes recommendations for WPAs to address contingent faculty morale: (1) develop grassroots leadership by asking instructors to develop committees related to improving working conditions, (2) honor and maintain instructor-designed curricula, (3) simplify program assessment to reduce the burden to instructors, (4) advocate for instructors' job stability to upper administration, and (5) advocate for instructors' job stability by forming a faculty advocacy group.

While WPAs seeking to address morale will find resources in chapter two, WPAs considering the implications of teaching-focused lecturer lines should look to chapters three and four. Mark McBeth and Tim McCormack write about lecturer lines as professionalized teaching career tracks in chapter three, "An Apologia and a Way Forward: In Defense of the Lecturer Line in Writing Programs," while Richard Colby and Rebekah Shultz Colby consider the problems with teaching-focused lecturer lines in chapter four, "Real Faculty But Not: The Full-Time, Non-Tenure-Track Position as Contingent Labor." McBeth and McCormack describe the benefits

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of a teaching-service lecturer line, while Colby and Shultz Colby examine how teaching-service lines undermine composition as a valid field of study. These chapters speak to different ways of thinking about rhetoric and composition as a field: is composition primarily a teaching career or a research career? Readers of these chapters can engage with this debate and consider applications to their own institutions, where composition may be valued primarily as a teaching career or a research career.

While discussions around lecturer lines speak to disciplinary identity, a related conversation about the unique expertise compositionists bring to their professions takes place in chapter five. Murphy's "Head to Head with edX?: Toward a New Rhetoric for Academic Labor" argues that compositionists must ground their work in the construction of knowledge to avoid being outsourced by automated scoring machines and for-profit universities. Murphy describes a four-course certificate for adjuncts in teaching first-year writing, a professional development opportunity designed with the goal of making visible first-year writing teachers' expertise and resisting the automation of teaching writing. The previous chapters argue for labor reform, especially professionalization, as means for composition to argue for its expertise, while the following chapters argue for moving contingent faculty into more secure positions.

Readers interested in carving pathways from contingent positions to tenure-track positions can look to chapter six. "Contingency, Solidarity, and Community Building: Principles for Converting Contingent to Tenure Track" by William B. Lalicker and Amy Lynch-Biniek offers nine principles for converting contingent faculty to the tenure track: hire compositionists; use a careful, rigorous hiring process; be transparent about what the job entails; give hiring preference to NTTF for tenure-track jobs; include NTTF in department life, but only do so if this involvement clearly leads to promotion; fairly evaluate NTTF's work and performance; avoid one-size-fits-all job descriptions; provide mentors; and provide opportunities and funding for publishing. Through their discussion of the collective bargaining agreement for contingent teachers in the fourteen-campus Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (of which Lalicker and Lynch-Biniek's universities are a part), they argue that, even in institutions without unions, faculty should "act like unions even when we're not legally organized" as such (100), thereby creating conditions in which contingent faculty are strong candidates for tenure-track or full-time positions. Chapter six offers guidelines for WPAs who wish to carve pathways for contingent faculty to be promoted to the tenure track.

Chapters seven and eight expose labor exploitation of adjunct writing center tutors and contingent writing center directors. Chapter seven, "The

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Other Invisible Hand: Adjunct Labor and Economies of the Writing Center," by Dani Nier-Weber argues that labor exploitation extends to writing centers, many of which are staffed by part-time adjuncts rather than students. Through Nier-Weber's description of the exploitative working conditions in three writing centers, WPAs and other readers may be compelled to examine working conditions in their own writing centers. The issue of contingent writing center labor extends to directorships, too, as illustrated in chapter nine, "The Risks of Contingent Writing Center Directorships" by Dawn Fels. Fels notes that the majority (71 percent) of writing center directors hold non-tenure-track positions (120), even as writing center directors serve writing programs by conducting valuable literacy research, mentoring undergraduate and graduate students, and promoting degree completion (130). WPAs have a stake in the wellbeing and security of writing center directorships, as without stability in these roles, writing programs suffer.

Other chapters focus on healthy working conditions and offer advice for how to resist threats to these conditions. In chapter nine, "The Uncertain Future of Past Success: Memory, Narrative, and the Dynamics of Institutional Change," Rolf Norgaard reminds readers of the oftentimes tentative nature of good working conditions for NTTF, like those at University of Colorado Boulder before new administrators stepped in and proposed changes to the workload and pay of full-time instructors. Norgaard encourages readers to educate new administrators about the institution's history regarding NTTF and to use these historical narratives as a form of agency to preserve good working conditions. Chapter ten, "Non-Tenure-Track Activism: Genre Appropriation in Program Reporting," by Chris Blankenship and Justin M. Jory relates how faculty used their department's seven-year external program review to create and circulate a document that described NTTF's working conditions. They argue for using the genre of the program report, which can expose the strengths and weaknesses of the writing program, as part of an activist strategy to draw attention to NTTF exploitation and to generate concern and interest across ranks about the working conditions of NTTF. Readers of chapters nine and ten will find strategies for educating administrators about contingent labor conditions and exposing exploitation.

Chapters eleven, twelve, and thirteen offer models for involving NTTF in curriculum design and department governance. In chapter eleven, "Traveling on the Assessment Loop: The Role of Contingent Labor in Curriculum Development," Jacob Babb and Courtney Adams Wooten describe how to include NTTF in course design decisions and argue that NTTF should be paid for their time spent developing curricula. Curricula directly impact students, and too often students lack knowledge of the working

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conditions of their professors. Chapter twelve, "Adjuncts Foster Change: Improving Adjunct Working Conditions by Forming An Associate Faculty Coalition (AFC)," addresses students' lack of knowledge, as Tracy Donhardt and Sarah Layden describe an Associate Faculty Coalition at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis implemented lesson plans across departments to teach students about the issue of exploitation of contingent labor. By engaging students in conversations about labor exploitation, faculty can build alliances and support from within the student body. In addition to teaching students about contingent labor issues, another strategy WPAs might consider is to invite contingent faculty to participate in department governance. Lacey Wootton and Glenn Moomau argue in chapter thirteen, "Building Our Own Bridges: A Case Study in Contingent Faculty Self-Advocacy," that NTTF must participate in department governance to make meaningful changes to labor conditions. These chapters offer WPAs particular strategies for discrete change within their own institutions.

WPAs thinking about labor issues may grapple with concerns such as responding to the emotional dimensions of contingent labor. Chapter fourteen, "What Works and What Counts: Valuing the Affective in Non-Tenure-Track Advocacy," attends to the emotional work of adjunct laborers, as Sue Doe, Maria Maisto, and Janelle Adsit use feminist theory to argue for the role of emotion as a tool for advocacy. These authors argue for using emotion in "keeping a collective grief present" (229) or making visible and public the emotional realities of faculty employment to prompt concern and action. This chapter offers WPAs thinking about labor issues the opportunity to reflect on the role of emotion in advocacy, encouraging WPAs to embrace emotion from NTTF.

The impact of working in a contingent position on one's identity and sense of voice are the subjects of chapters fifteen and sixteen. As readers will discover in chapter fifteen, "Hitting the Wall: Identity and Engagement at a Two-Year College," Desirée Holter Amanda Martin and Jeffrey Klausman use the lens of underemployment to examine the shifting sense of professional identities for adjuncts when their college eliminated an adjunct-taught course, English 100, from the curriculum. WPAs might use this chapter to argue for the inhumanity of long-term underemployment. Even so, in chapter sixteen, "The Problem of Speaking for Adjuncts," Seth Kahn warns WPAs and others that speaking on behalf of NTTF can serve as an "act of colonial aggression" (259). Instead, tenured faculty and WPAs can use their secure positions to listen to adjuncts rather than to speak on adjuncts' behalf.

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Graduate student labor and material working conditions are the subject of chapters seventeen and eighteen. Allison Laubach Wright turns her attention to graduate student workers at the University of Houston (UH) in chapter seventeen, "The Rhetoric of Excellence and the Erasure of Graduate Labor." Wright argues that graduate students are necessary for UH to brand itself as a "Tier One" university, yet the narrative of graduate students as apprentices to tenure-line faculty paints graduate students as benefitting from their assistantships in nonmonetary ways to compensate for the often-dire wages in these positions. Another issue that shapes the working conditions of contingent faculty is the allocation of office space, as both graduate teaching assistants and other contingent faculty often lack adequate workspaces. Chapter eighteen, "Brutal(ist) Meditations: Space and Labor-Movement in a Writing Program" by Michelle LaFrance and Anicca Cox, describes the disparity between University of Massachusetts Dartmouth's third floor that houses the English department's faculty mailboxes and tenure-track offices, and the second floor that consists of one room with "five working computers and two banks of desks" for twenty to thirty adjuncts to share (279). This chapter speaks to any contingent faculty who has felt the painful reality of their employment conditions through the lack of an on-campus space to meet with students or prepare course materials. WPAs might read this chapter with an eye toward analyzing the spaces in their own institutions and might consider if contingent laborers have adequate on-campus space for their jobs.

As our field continues to organize for labor reform, it is vital to provide tangible examples of change, like those in the chapters described above, and a common discourse to help unite contingent workers and non-contingent workers across institutions. This book offers examples of ways to take meaningful steps toward fair labor practices. Future scholarship on contingent labor might consider the following questions: How can we build a common vocabulary to define labor problems and spark action? If much of the discourse surrounding contingency is hollow, dramatic, or angry, what alternative discourses might be used to make strides toward better labor conditions? Here, I offer two recommendations for future scholarship about contingent faculty exploitation:

1. Apply a consistent format to chapters to make the work easily scannable. For example, use subheadings to organize information within chapters by institutional context, writing program snapshot, exigency, reform effort, successes, challenges, lessons learned, and primary documents.

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2. Develop a common terminology to unite readers working across differing contexts. While I appreciated Kahn, Lakicker, and Lynch-Biniek's description of their editorial choice to allow authors in the collection to use their local terminology for contingent positions, consistent language and terminology may help people across multiple institutions to talk about labor exploitation. Future texts about contingent labor exploitation might work toward a common vocabulary to achieve a shared discourse that can facilitate large-scale, organized action.

As our field continues to challenge contingent labor, we are called to engage in critical reflection, research, and action. *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition* does just that. Through compelling narratives of reform in multiple institutions, this book offers concrete strategies to build solidarity and fight the exploitation of contingent labor. As a PhD student and contingent faculty member, I appreciated the authors' stories of small but noticeable changes in their labor conditions and their suggestions for change. The collection's breadth of focus can apply to readers in contingent positions, graduate students, writing program administrators, writing center directors, tenure-track faculty, and department chairs. By attending to localized institutional contexts, the collection achieves specificity and generates potential solutions to problems in such a way that readers can easily imagine adapting the solutions to their own localized contexts.

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