The Laborious Reality vs. the Imagined Ideal of Graduate Student Instructors of Writing

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Abstract

In fall 2017, the Writing Program Administration Graduate Organization (WPA-GO) Labor Census Task Force surveyed 344 graduate student instructors (GSIs) of writing from across the U.S. about their labor conditions. Our findings highlight the material challenges GSIs face in writing programs: low pay, inconsistent access to healthcare, and little support for health and family life. These labor conditions, we argue, construct an imagined ideal GSI, disproportionately impacting GSIs with marginalized identities.

Dedication

This article is dedicated to Katie McWain, an early enthusiastic member of the WPA-GO Labor Census Task Force.

Introduction

Graduate student instructors (GSIs) occupy a complex, contested role in writing programs. Within writing programs, graduate students from various disciplines will often be the instructor of record who designs syllabi, crafts assignments and lesson plans, and assesses student writing. This labor is crucial to institutions of higher education across the United States. According to the 2014 MLA Survey of Departmental Staffing, GSIs make up the majority of the composition writing instructional faculty at PhD-granting institutions (nearly 40%) and a considerable proportion at MA-granting institutions (15%). Despite the fact that GSIs largely fuel the work of writing programs, the labor of GSIs is often overlooked as labor. GSIs are framed as students first, apprentices second, and workers rarely. This framing has led to a dearth of data on the labor conditions of GSIs in writing programs, a gap we aimed to examine in a nation-wide survey in 2017[1]. 344 GSIs reported information about their stipends, healthcare, leave policies, teaching load, and other labor conditions. Our survey questions can be found here: https://bit.ly/GSIsurveydata. In this article, we expand on the information in our 2019 "Report on Graduate Student Instructor

Labor Conditions in Writing Programs" (https://bit.ly/GSIsurveydata) and overtly argue for more humane treatment of GSIs in writing programs.

Our findings highlight the material challenges GSIs face in writing programs, including low pay, inconsistent access to healthcare, and little support for mental health and family life. Through our analysis of survey data, we advance two claims. First, universities, graduate programs, and writing programs must ensure humane labor conditions for GSIs. Recent literature suggests this approach has pragmatic benefits such that improving the labor conditions of teachers leads to improved student outcomes (Barnum, 2016). More importantly, we want to work in a profession that fairly compensates all ranks of labor because it is the just and equitable thing to do. Second, a lack of humane labor conditions contributes to a lack of diversity in the profession. The typical working conditions of GSIs, we argue, paint a picture of academia's *imagined ideal*, a term we use to describe a graduate student who has outside financial support and who never gets sick or disabled or has children. Inadequate stipends and healthcare coverage pose a challenge for many potential and current GSIs and may pose a greater challenge still for GSIs from marginalized communities, such as non-white, working class, queer, and/or disabled GSIs. For writing studies to become a more diverse field, we must fiercely advocate for more humane labor practices that address the needs of GSIs from underrepresented communities.

Tracing the GSI-as-Worker in Writing Studies and Beyond

Composition courses occupy a paradoxical role in the university, at once in demand and undervalued. These courses are deemed essential, often required for incoming students. At the same time, composition courses are often framed as a service course rather than a rich site of knowledge making. Writing studies scholars have argued that the evidence of the university's disdain for composition can be seen in increasing casualization of writing faculty: the phenomenon of long-term permanent positions turning into short-term precarious positions (Crowley, 1998; Kahn et al., 2017). As Kirsti Cole (2019) explains, "the increased demand for, and location of, standing composition programs at colleges and universities required a cheap labor solution to fill the need gap created by the enrollment increases" (p. 155). We posit that the work of teaching composition and the labor of GSIs are both still undervalued in the university, compounding in multiple layers of exploitation that perpetuates the overall casualization of writing faculty (Samuels, 2017, p. 16). Robert Samuels (2017) argues the increasing presence of GSIs in writing classes is one of the reasons "there are so few jobs for graduate students after they earn their PhDs" (16). By depending heavily

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on graduate labor, writing programs, especially at research universities, can avoid hiring full-time faculty to teach first-year writing.

Graduate students' historical role of easy, cheap labor in the writing class highlights their paradoxical role in a writing program: both student and faculty, apprentice *and* instructor of record. As Michael Bérubé (2013) wryly notes, the apprenticeship model "dates back to the days of the guilds, [when] the apprentices got jobs" (n.p.). If grad students are not guaranteed jobs after graduation, what is a graduate assistantship preparation for? Marc Bousquet (2002) asserts that graduate school is not preparation for a teaching career, but rather, the start and end of most teaching careers (p. 88). Scholars such as Bérubé and Bousquet reveal an uncomfortable truth: graduate student teaching is rarely *preparation* for a stable teaching career. And yet, despite the critiques of the apprenticeship model as outdated, it continues to haunt graduate education—leading to wide-ranging material impacts. As Allison Laubach Wright (2017) asserts, "when it prevents new thinking about a broken system and silences dissent for exploitative labor situations, maintaining the language of the apprenticeship model is directly implicated in the larger problems of the labor system" (pp. 275-276). Wright's critique of the apprenticeship model is echoed in graduate labor organizing, in particular, efforts to unionize. Roxanne Mountford (2002) observes, "that the work of a GTA is work—not a kind of apprenticeship for which universities can award poverty-level wages—has been underscored by the efforts of graduate students to unionize nationwide" (p. 43). Indeed, apprentices lack access to the benefits of employment, with legal protections for collective bargaining, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), and long-term disability not extending to GSIs.

The increased casualization of writing instruction, emboldened by the apprenticeship model of graduate labor, creates an imagined ideal writing teacher that is both raced and gendered. The work of teaching writing has historically been framed as white women's work. Donna Strickland (2011) notes this trend emerged in the early twentieth century when white women were relegated to "the lowest levels of the academic hierarchy while simultaneously elevating the primarily white, native-born, teachers as keepers of correctness and racial propriety" (p. 38). Strickland's historical analysis illustrates the emergence of the imagined ideal writing teacher: a woman, as the work of teaching writing is associated with secretarial work rather than the work of big ideas, and a white woman, as the job entails maintaining racial propriety through surveillance and assessment of student writing. Thus, feminization of composition instruction justified the poor labor conditions for writing faculty, while at the same time, the racialization of composition instruction justified the exclusion of non-white bodies. These

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associations were not left behind in the twentieth century. Recently, Eileen Schell (2017) posed the following questions:

> how is contingency tied to the bodies of workers and students that are marked as non-normative and different? In a globalized economy, white women, women of color, and men of color, working class men and women, people living with disabilities, and queer and trans people are often treated as an exploitable and expendable workforce; how does higher education mirror that exploitation? (pp. xiv-xv)

Schell's questions prompt us to consider how hierarchies of acceptable bodies continue to dictate labor conditions. Contingency is not only relevant to adjunct labor but also to GSIs, as their positions are contingent on their progress through graduate education. Liminality, too, is tied to certain bodies. How are the non-normative bodies Schell names stuck in-between ranks: never fully faculty, never fully student, never fully protected as employees?

Our study attempts to bring together conversations about the undervaluing of composition, graduate labor, and non-normative bodies, and illustrates how this layered undervaluing has compounded to create an untenable situation for many GSIs, especially those from underrepresented communities. As Laura Colaneri (2019), a graduate student organizer, insists, "bettering working conditions and increasing wages through a union can only serve to make graduate school more accessible to marginalized groups" (n.p.). Colaneri and other GSI organizers highlight how poor conditions threaten the ability of GSIs from underrepresented communities to complete their degrees as well as the unpaid diversity work often heaped upon graduate workers of color (Kesslen, 2019; Watlington, 2019). Colaneri, Strickland, Schell, and Bousquet insist that labor conditions welcome or forbid certain bodies. Our data below paints a picture of low stipends, overwhelming workloads, inadequate health care, and vague parental/medical leave policies that imagine an ideal GSI. Particularly in the moments where the demographics of participants in our survey seemed to echo this ideal, we hope to highlight the struggles of the participants who did NOT fit this imagined ideal—people of color, disabled people, queer folks, parents, and/or working-class scholars. The labor conditions we explore present a barrier to entry into the professoriate for these GSIs.

Surveying GSIs

In early 2017, the newly formed WPA-GO Labor Census Task Force began to develop a survey to understand the working conditions of GSIs. Like Sarah Liggett, Kerri Jordan, and Steve Price (2011), we see that surveys are

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both method and inquiry, and as such, function "*methodologically* as a distinctive way of making knowledge" (p. 68). Liggett, Jordan, and Price offer the example of Jo Ann Griffin et al.'s 2007 article reporting survey data from the Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) in order to demonstrate that the focus is not only on numbers, but "the survey responses also create a nationwide mosaic of how writing centers operate" (p. 67). Following these scholars, we sought to illustrate the mosaic of graduate students' experiences, starting with the research question: How do labor conditions within graduate writing programs operate and how do GSIs experience those conditions?

We hypothesized that asking GSIs to evaluate the adequacy of their stipends and healthcare benefits would help us understand how these labor conditions precondition and give rise to the situation at hand. Like Cristyn L. Elder, Megan Schoen, and Ryan Skinnell (2014), we attempted to gather large-scale survey data about GSIs' lived experience. We worked toward this objective with sixteen multi-point questions with yes/no, multiple choice, and open-ended responses on stipends, workload, healthcare benefits, leave policies and the experiential dimensions of those conditions. We wanted to amplify the perceptions and experiences of GSIs to explore how the mosaic of their labor conditions contributes to the imagined ideal GSI.

After obtaining IRB approval and conducting usability testing, we moved on to survey distribution in late September 2017. We recruited participants using multiple and redundant strategies to access a variety of institutional contexts. Through a process of distributed snowball sampling, we circulated the survey via social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), email listservs (WPA-L, WPA-GO), and emails to DGSs and WPAs at institutions listed in the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition and The Master's Consortium of Writing Studies Specialists, asking them to forward our survey link to their GSIs.

Data Analysis

While most questions resulted in quantitative data, five open-ended questions and demographic questions afforded for more qualitative responses that required coding. To code responses to "other" and open-ended questions, we used qualitative data analysis methods (Creswell, 2014). For each qualitative survey response item, two coders first worked independently to recursively read the responses and develop coding schemas, and then later worked together to merge their codes and negotiate boundary items until the coding schema was valid and reliable. In addition to reporting numerical data, we also analyzed the data from the survey responses for statistical

correlations by running Chi-square and ANOVA tests in JMP software. If a test shows a probability or *p* value of less than .05, it is considered statistically significant. As Isabelle Thompson et al. (2009) explain, "The *p* level indicates the extent to which the differences between the two groups would occur by chance" (p. 89). The statistically significant correlations in the data help to illustrate the mosaic of graduate student labor experiences.

Results and Discussion

We received 344 responses, including 215 PhD students, 74 MA/MS students, 19 MA/PhD students, and 36 MFA students. Students employed by at least 87 universities (not including four participants who did not list a university) reported on their experiences as GSIs. Across the 87 universities located in a total of 37 states, the majority of our survey participants were enrolled in public institutions (89.7%) with very high research activity levels (73.2%). Another 22% of GSIs serve in high research institutions, and the remaining 5% are in doctoral/professional universities and master's colleges and universities. In terms of our respondents' demographics, we had four open-ended questions that allowed GSIs to write in their gender, sexual orientation, race, and dis/ability. After coding these responses as described above, our overall respondents identify in the following ways. Gender identifications are 63% female, 27% male, 1% nonbinary or gender nonconforming, and 8% with no response. Sexual orientations are 53% heterosexual, 27% LGBQ, 2% asexual, >1% other, and 16% with no response. Dis/ability identifications are 15% disabled, 56% nondisabled, and 29% with no response. Racial identifications are 79.1% white, 4.9% Asian, 3.5% Hispanic or Latinx, 3.2% mixed race, 1.5% Black, and the rest no response—startling numbers we return to below.

Looking at the overall trends in the demographic data, the majority of respondents identified as white (79%), women (63%), nondisabled (56%), and heterosexual (53%). This data suggests that Strickland's observations on the imagined ideal writing teacher, a white woman, persist today. We believe that these overall trends support our claim that graduate programs imagine an idealized graduate student—white, nondisabled, and heterosexual with no dependents—which is problematic because graduate school is a pipeline to the professoriate. We point to both the quantitative data about GSI stipends, workload, and health benefits and their stories, gathered from our open-ended questions, to highlight how labor conditions construct an exclusive imagined ideal. Sections and subsections began with quotes from our respondents that speak to the overall themes.

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Overworked and Underpaid: GSI Stipends & Workload

> "We deserve better pay and benefits for all the work we do. I love my job, but I'm not surviving financially, and I will no longer be continuing the program because of it."

We asked how many years GSIs received funding, the amount of funding, and its adequacy. Master's students typically receive two years of funding (~80%), MFA students are more often funded for three years (~68%), and doctoral students are typically funded for four (~40%) or five (~45%) years. A small number of GSIs (~5%) receive no funding whatsoever. On average, the 316 GSIs who responded to this survey question make $15,500 per year. The lowest yearly amount reported is $540, while the highest was $26,000. Table 1 presents average stipends alongside GSIs' perception of their funding.

Table 1

Average Stipends and Perception of Stipend Adequacy by Degree Programs

Program Level (n=344)	Average Stipend (n=316)	Stipend (In)Adequacy Yes = Adequate; No = Inadequate (n=341)	
MA/MS (n=74)	$11,184.50	No	55 (76%)
		Yes	17 (24%)
MA to PhD (n=19)	$16,786.90	No	13 (68%)
		Yes	6 (32%)
MFA (n=36)	$13,691.10	No	26 (72%)
		Yes	10 (28%)
PhD (n=215)	$16,607.70	No	150 (70%)
		Yes	64 (30%)

PhD students earn the highest stipends overall, to a degree that is highly statistically significant (<.0001). That instructors pursuing higher degrees earn higher stipends isn't shocking on its own (though the MFA degree is also terminal). What we find noteworthy is that GSIs across all ranks report their stipends are inadequate. Also, the dramatically lower pay for MA, MS, and MFA students leads us to question how the field of writing studies is

considering—or more likely, not considering—the living needs and pedagogical value of masters-level and MFA GSIs.

Within programs, too, students report variation among pay with little transparency. As one respondent reported, "Pay rates are uneven for us. Some people have just negotiated for more money and it is given on an ad hoc basis. This is individual and not codified in any way, and, feels uneven." Such variation gives us concern. In our survey, across all demographic categories, white, cisgender male, nondisabled, and straight GSIs reported, on average, higher salaries than their nonwhite, women and nonbinary, disabled, and LGBT counterparts. We wonder if uneven GSI pay within departments might partially explain the pay inequity for various marginalized groups that we found in the data. Additionally, we did not ask about mandatory student fees, an oversight we regret as several respondents noted that their fees, not covered by tuition remission, eat up a large chunk of their stipend.

Stipend (In)adequacy

> "I think there is an overall assumption of economic privilege in my program, and many others. Our stipend is considered generous by administration in comparison with other programs, but it is still not much money at all and the only students satisfied seem to be the ones like me, who are young, have no dependents, no major expenses, able-bodied, from economic privilege, often white."

As we indicated in our research question, we were interested not only in the labor conditions of graduate writing programs, but also how students *experience* those conditions. As a result, we asked students if their stipend was adequate for covering their living needs (n=341). The overwhelming majority (71.6%) reported that their stipends were inadequate. When asked to describe how their stipends are adequate or not, 28 GSIs explained that their stipends do not or barely cover their cost of food. One respondent explains, "The English department here started a mini-food pantry for the GTAs affected and provided info for how to receive pay-advances so people could eat and make rent." Many others described sacrificing basic needs with complicated calculus. For instance, one GSI reports, "I have no room for emergencies. I can barely cover rent, utilities and groceries, but if, say, I get a flat tire, I've got to cut back on food so I can afford a new tire."

While 28.4% of respondents reported that their stipends were adequate, out of the 96 "adequate responses," approximately two-thirds offered important caveats to *why* their stipends were adequate. For instance, many GSIs who claimed their stipends were adequate explained that they have

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family or partner support, entered graduate school with no student debt, and/or do not have dependents. Others explained that their stipends may cover food and rent but aren't enough to cover medical emergencies or dental work. For instance, one respondent noted their stipend, "just barely covers living expenses; any emergencies/dr. appointments/extra needs send me into crisis mode." Low stipends, then, can prevent students from seeking out needed medical care. Another respondent claimed their stipend was adequate, but then elaborated, "Although I have to forgo some meals, I can usually get by each month." Therefore, we are comfortable insisting that while stipends may be adequate for some GSIs, that adequacy often requires sacrifice—such as medical care or meals. In other words, stipends are likely to be adequate for the imagined ideal GSIs: those with economic privilege and thus are more likely to be privileged along other axes of identity, e.g., white, single/childfree, cisgender, nondisabled.

Workload

> "I believe we should be given more money considering the amount of work we spend a week grading papers and preparing for class. I work about 30-35 hours a week, but am paid for 20 hours."

GSIs noted that their pay did not correspond with the amount of labor they contributed to the writing program. Or as one respondent more candidly phrased it, "too much work for too little pay." Indeed, 65.4% of GSIs overall reported working more hours than contracted, while just 26.8% reported working the same number of hours as contracted, and 7.5% reported working fewer than contracted. Table 2 demonstrates that the majority of GSIs report their contracted workload is 16-20 hours per week (68%), leading us to surmise that most programs feel that a GSI appointment should require this amount of work each week. The fact that only 25% of respondents reported working that number of hours, though, seems to suggest that writing program expectations do not align with GSI reality. This discrepancy suggests that programs (and perhaps students, too) may still frame the role of GSIs as apprenticeships, setting stipends at a fixed rate that does not align with workload.

Table 2

GSIs Reported Number of Hours Contracted to Work vs. Hours Actually Worked

Range of Hours	% of GSIs Contracted to Work Hours in that Range	% of GSIs Reported Hours Worked in that Range
Fewer than 10	N/A	1%
10-15	15%	12%
16-20	68%	25%
21-25	8%	20%
More than 25	3%	38%
Other	6%	2%

Even though the pay for the labor that they have been contracted to do fails to cover the living needs of 71.6% of GSIs, the majority of GSIs (65.4%) still do *more* work than they are actually contracted for. As for course load and credit hours, there is a clear disconnect between how many hours GSI employers *think* it takes to properly and ethically deliver quality instruction and how many hours GSIs feel obligated to work in order to do that work properly. As one respondent explains,

> We are required to teach two courses, with moderate guidance (given the syllabus and course assignments the week before that we should follow and have a meeting once a week) the first semester….*We work long hours to be the best teachers and this often comes at a sacrifice (health, sleep, our own studies).* (emphasis added)

Another survey respondent more bluntly articulated the links among stipends, workload, and student wellbeing, explaining, "A larger stipend would make it easier to justify how hungry I am despite how long I work." Our survey respondents speak to the tension between administrative expectations and GSI reality—and the impact of this tension on the health of GSIs. In order to meet the needs of their students, GSIs feel pressured to sacrifice their health, sleep, and studies, making it challenging to thrive as scholars, teachers, and humans.

Another factor that affects GSIs' perception of their stipend (in)adequacy is the number of hours they actually work, and as mentioned above, the majority of survey respondents (65.4%) are working more hours than their contract stipulates. Stipend adequacy and the number of hours that GSIs actually work are associated, as evidenced by a significant p value of 0.0110. Most GSIs (68%) are contracted to work 16-20 hours per week, but

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38% of GSIs report working more than 25 hours per week. Therefore, it should be no surprise that the greatest number of GSIs who feel their stipends are inadequate work more than 25 hours per week (32%). In addition, there is a highly significant correlation between stipend amounts and stipend adequacy (p value of <.0001). As might be expected, GSIs reporting higher stipends tend to feel their stipends are more adequate than GSIs with lower stipends.

Taken together, these figures on stipend adequacy and workload strongly suggest that the standard compensation of GSIs assumes that GSIs are single and without dependents, have outside financial support, and require little to no medical care during their time as GSIs. Here, one GSI explains the prohibitive and exclusive nature of GSI stipends and high workload: "These assistantship programs are designed for healthy, young, single students. They are not appropriate for students with non-normative households, health issues or a lack of familial support." This observation echoes Bousquet's (2020) question about who is able to accept such poor labor conditions in the first place: "What does it mean that increasingly only persons who can 'afford to teach' are entering higher education as a profession?" (p. 98). It appears GSI packages are designed for an imagined ideal, scholar-teachers who aren't burdened by the need for food, childcare, or car maintenance. Given the wealth gap between white and non-white families in the United States, the expectation that GSIs will have outside support disproportionately threatens the success of GSIs of color—in particular, Black GSIs (de Souza Briggs, 2019). These assumptions, then, harm not only GSIs but also the field as a whole, as many underrepresented GSIs lack the material resources to thrive under the reported conditions. How can the field of writing studies strive for diversity in the professoriate if GSI compensation is designed for GSIs with economic privilege?

GSI Healthcare and Wellness

> "No dental insurance; no vision insurance; the copay is too high for therapy; the urgent care is too high; the deductible keeps increasing; no affordable option for birth control or other women's needs (I can't use my insurace [sic] for this; I go to an income-based facility in town)."

GSIs' experiences of stipends relate strongly to their experiences of healthcare benefits. The lower a GSI's stipend is, the less adequate they feel their healthcare and leave policies are. In the case of health care plans, there is a statistically significant correlation between reports of adequacy and the amounts of stipends (p value of <.0001). The correlation between the

adequacy of leave policies and the amount of stipends is also statistically significant (p value of .0139). In other words, GSIs who are struggling to make ends meet with their stipends also face higher barriers in accessing healthcare—a critical component in GSI wellness and retention. Indeed, to get an overall picture of healthcare, we asked participants what kind of coverage is provided at their institutions, the cost of the plan(s), and ways the plan does or does not meet their needs. We also asked GSIs about their access to paid parental and medical leave in their programs. We unearthed sobering information about the state of health and wellness coverage, much of which can be characterized by lack of coverage, inadequacies in coverage, and GSIs' unfamiliarity with policies.

Lack of Healthcare Coverage

> "I don't have health insurance because I can't afford it on my own, and Florida doesn't offer medicaid for low-income indviduals [sic]."

We were happy to find that the majority of GSIs report having access to healthcare in some form. However, for far too many GSIs, the inadequate health coverage erects additional barriers in their pursuit of a graduate degree. Nearly 15% of respondents reported that no health care or stipend for coverage is offered by their program (see Table 3 for the full breakdown). In addition, many GSIs reported that their programs offered inconsistent or no coverage options for partners and children. For example, one respondent said, "My partner is also a graduate student at the same university. We each have a separate health care plan and we pay another company to insure our child, because our university health care plan does not cover spouses or children." Others reported that spousal coverage was either not available or too expensive.

Table 3

Types of Health Benefits (n = 343)

Types of Health Benefits	% GSI Reported
Student health insurance	57.7%
Student health insurance for GSI and dependent	35.6%
Employee health care plan (same as staff and faculty)	8.5%
Extra stipend to go toward health costs	5%
No health care or stipend offered	14.9%

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For GSIs who are offered healthcare coverage, our survey respondents describe the variety of ways that the coverage is inadequate for their needs. Of the approximately 85% of GSIs who reported that their program did offer a healthcare plan, 40% (125 of 311 responses) indicated that their plan did not meet their healthcare needs. The most common reasons cited by participants were specific limitations of the health coverage offered (n=77) and the high cost of premiums, deductibles, and out-of-pocket expenses (n=70). One respondent explained, "The health plan is not guaranteed at the rate it currently is. I can't afford to stay here in the program if it is no longer subsidized." GSIs also reported that their plans did not cover certain types of care (e.g., dental, vision) and/or specific medications, procedures, and tests. For example, one respondent described their healthcare plan as adequate even as they reported their co-pays are often high and they do not have vision or dental coverage. Another GSI stated that dental coverage is not available and, "if I need to see a specialist, sometimes there are none in my area on my plan." Three respondents noted that their healthcare plan does not cover transgender healthcare services, creating an additional expensive barrier for trans GSIs. 11 respondents also explained that the available healthcare options do not cover dependents and/or spouses or the cost to cover dependents and/or spouses is prohibitive. Of those 11 responses, four claimed that dependent coverage was cut last year, a stark reminder of the liminality of GSIs: benefits can change in a moment's notice, creating abrupt crises for GSIs with health and/or caregiving needs. For GSIs who found their healthcare plans to be adequate, they stated that flexibility to choose healthcare providers, low premiums and copays, and the ability to cover partners and dependents were key to their satisfaction.

Inadequacies in Mental Health Coverage

> "I have generalized anxiety disorder, attention deficit disorder, and chronic depression. Our program has no infrastructure in place to help students and GAs with mental illness through the very difficult systemic hurdles starvation wages bring about."

In a separate question, we asked survey respondents whether their programs offer mental health and wellness support and (if applicable) how that support does or does not meet their needs. Responses indicated that 22% of GSIs are either not provided mental health and wellness support or are provided inadequate support. For example, 68 students reported limitations (e.g., to the number of appointments or selection of doctors) or high costs. One respondent shared that although their program does provide access to mental health services, "undergraduate and graduate students are

only allowed to have 6 appointments at the Counseling Center total during their time at school. Afterward, we must find an off-campus therapist who takes our insurance." We highlight inadequacies in mental health support separately from health care plans partly because mental health support is a known concern for graduate students across disciplines (Evans et al., 2018; Grady et al., 2013; Perry, 2019). In their study of 2,279 graduate students from a variety of fields, Evans et al. (2018) found that "graduate students are more than six times likely to experience depression and anxiety as compared to the general population" (p. 282), highlighting the need for better access to mental health resources and additional training for faculty mentors.

Inadequacies in Parental and Medical Leave

> "As far as I know, we get unpaid leave, but the 'clock' keeps running. So a semester of leave is still part of the 5 years of funding we get (even though we didn't get funding for that semester)."

An even greater number of respondents said their program lacked parental and sick leave policies. Just 5.2% of respondents reported that their programs offer guaranteed paid parental leave, while 2.3% reported they had access to paid parental leave, but it was not guaranteed. Far more GSIs report that their program offers no official parental leave policy (37.6%). Similarly, 32.4% of respondents reported that their program offers no official medical leave policy. Of the GSIs who do have access to official medical leave, 12.8% report access to paid leave and 11.2% report access to unpaid leave.

Responses highlight the discrepancy between written leave policies and the cultural expectations of medical and parental leave practices. Several respondents explained that GSIs are instructed not to take leave at all (6.2%) or to arrange coverage of any missed classes due to sickness (2.8%). One respondent who was unaware of an official parental leave policy added, "My friend had a baby one semester and they let her register for one hour (so she could be continually enrolled), but she had to pay for it. They put her funding on hold and it started up again when she came back." Another respondent noted that though they did not know the leave policies of the program, they had observed graduate workers assigned online courses immediately following birth.

Finally, we also found that many respondents did not know the details of leave policies. Overwhelmingly, GSIs did not know their program's sick leave policies (31.2%) nor the parental leave policies of their program (37.6%). This data illustrates to us, then, that not only are GSIs often

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denied official leave policies in the face of birth, adoption, and/or sickness, but they also have to overcome pressure to return early and/or expend additional labor to find coverage for their missed classes. That so many GSIs lack knowledge of the official policies, too, points to an additional barrier if GSIs unexpectedly need to use parental or medical leave during their course of study.

Healthcare and Diversity

> "Having children is also a blessing, but personally it puts me at a disadvantage when it comes to my teaching preparation and research. There is little to no support to mitigate this, and our university yanked dependent coverage from us last year which put more of a strain on our finances and time."

GSIs enter graduate school with their whole bodies; they can't leave their health issues, disabilities, and/or family obligations at the door. What medical sacrifices, such as prescription medicine, vision and dental care, mental health support, are GSIs expected to make in order to pursue their graduate degrees? Ideally, none, and thus, we see the inadequacies of healthcare provided to GSIs to be a diversity issue. As one respondent notes, student health care plans are often designed for an imagined ideal young and healthy body: "I am over 50 years old, so the university health program is not designed for someone with my health needs, which includes leukemia monitoring and mental-health supports." The field of disability studies has long noted the increased barriers disabled and chronically ill scholar-teachers face in academia (Dolmage, 2017; Price, 2011). In addition to the stigma disabled and sick people may face in academia, a lack of comprehensive healthcare can prevent them from even entering the field. The imagined ideal of the healthy, nondisabled GSI leaves few options for sick and disabled GSIs: they must gain admission to one of the few programs that offer comprehensive and affordable healthcare, find alternative coverage, or leave programs.

Furthermore, limited healthcare options and leave programs threaten to exclude pregnant people, parents/caregivers, and future parents. By making dependent healthcare inaccessible through high cost or unavailability, universities threaten the financial and medical wellbeing of parent GSIs and their children. The parental leave policies reported can be similarly harmful, with many GSIs unsure of their options or pressured to not take leave at all. We find this especially troubling given the gender make-up of the respondents (63.37% identified as women). Of course, not all women can or want to have children, and men and non-binary people can have

children. Still, women tend to take parental leave far more often than men for a variety of complicated medical, social, family, and financial reasons (Douglas-Gabriel, 2018).

Researchers, activists, and parents have long observed the benefits of parental leave programs for both children and parents, including a lower chance of postpartum depression (Kornfeind & Sipsma, 2018). When universities and academic programs limit parental leave, through lackluster policies, cultural pressure, or the absence of information on leave, they reinforce the archaic, yet persistently destructive myth, that academic parents—and particularly mothers—should either never allow their parenting selves to interfere with work or leave work completely (Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009; Tolentino, 2016). The inadequacies of health care and leave policies that our survey participants describe suggest that policies for GSI compensation are based on an imagined ideal GSI, and that graduate programs risk losing or not recruiting students who do not fit the imagined ideal in their programs.

Conclusion

Our findings reveal the overlooked, yet often dire, labor conditions of GSIs of writing. Indeed, many of the numbers and responses worry or even infuriate us, including the stories of GSIs devoting their time, energy, and care into teaching while struggling to pay rent or sacrificing meals and healthcare. As we hope our study has demonstrated, the labor conditions of GSIs reveal what we have called in this article the *imagined ideal*; it is this imagined ideal that preconditions GSIs to be exploited. In sum, the writing studies field has less than ideal labor conditions *because* it has grown accustomed to an unrealistic imagined ideal of GSIs.

We invite readers to imagine a new ideal with us, one that values the work of teaching writing, GSI labor, and the variety of bodies who contribute to this work. In this new ideal, we envision universities that pay GSIs a living wage, offer comprehensive and affordable healthcare to GSIs and their families, and provide clearly communicated medical and parental leave policies. To reimagine the mosaic of GSI labor conditions, we propose two critical re-framings that emerge from our data, re-framings that make room for more bodies and experiences in the profession.

Recognize GSI Labor as Labor

As we've articulated throughout this article, we insist on recognizing GSIs as workers—as students and mentees, of course, but also as workers deserving of food, shelter, and medicine. GSIs shouldn't have to choose between

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graduate study and healthcare, meals, and/or starting a family. If we value the knowledge-making of GSIs from diverse backgrounds in the writing classroom and the field, WPAs, faculty, and directors of graduate study must call for equitable labor conditions that allow GSIs to succeed as whole people. WPAs and graduate mentors might begin with the following seemingly small steps: solicit anonymous feedback from GSIs about their experiences of labor conditions in the program; provide measures for maintaining reasonable GSI workloads; increase transparency of graduate students' stipends at the institutional level; and clearly document and communicate health and medical care coverage, medical and parental leave policies, as well as procedures for accessing this coverage, during both recruitment and training phases of the graduate program. These steps might begin the significant work of recognizing GSI labor as labor and thus, create avenues for assessing and organizing around the material conditions of GSIs.

Attend to the Role of Labor Conditions in the State of Diversity of Our Field

In our conversations about the data, we kept returning to numbers on race in the demographics section: why so few respondents of color? We were not alone in expressing concern that almost 80% of respondents identified as white. Asao Inoue (2019) tweeted a screenshot of our initial report's demographic data with the note, "This is some of the demographic data from their report that should concern us all." The data does indeed concern us. We can look at these numbers in two ways: the first, that we failed in reaching out to GSIs of color in our outreach efforts, and the second, that the discrepancy reflects the racial make-up of our field. We believe that these possibilities are not mutually exclusive, but rather constitutive. Because our field is overwhelmingly white, labor research, advocacy, and practices often operate from a perspective of whiteness. In other words, the lack of diversity in our programs exacerbates the lack of diversity; when nondisabled, economically privileged, white, and/or single graduate students make up the majority of GSIs, discriminatory and inhumane labor conditions might remain invisible to faculty, administration, and researchers. Practically speaking, addressing this also means going beyond diversity and wellness programming and attending to the labor conditions of GSIs. Events promoting self-care for GSIs are great, for instance, but cannot replace affordable access to mental health care for GSIs of color. In other words, with better material conditions, we believe more students from diverse backgrounds will have a less arduous path to the professoriate.

Acknowledging Local Complexity, Proposing Heuristics

As we present these findings, we foresee two potential critiques: first, that our study largely avoids providing concrete solutions or examples of programs that have successfully addressed similar issues; and second, where it does so, it doesn't pay sufficient attention to the heterogeneity and local complexities of the writing programs within which GSIs work. This complexity of funding structures for GSIs; of WPA authority and positionality; of writing program architecture and ecology; of institutional history and procedures and more; makes us wary to provide monolithic solutions, or to suggest model programs. Nevertheless, we offer the following as some initial, heuristic steps for moving toward concrete action.

We encourage all WPAs and faculty—regardless of how they feel their programs stack up against this study—to critically analyze how their programs might create more equitable labor conditions regarding the following questions:

- How do contracts, policies, rules, and communication surrounding GSI labor assume an imagined ideal?
- What challenges might these pose for non-normative GSI bodies?
- What moves are within my power to support GSIs in easing or eradicating those challenges?

The first two questions are designed to spark reflection for the current state of GSI labor conditions—potentially *kairotic* to explore during discussions on recruitment, diversity, and retention—while the final question pushes us to think creatively about how we might support minoritized GSIs. For instance, how might WPAs compensate Black, Indigenous, and GSIs of color for the diversity work that is often thrust upon them in writing programs? How might teaching workloads be adjusted to account for the increased care work of GSIs with young children during a pandemic? To put it crudely, we are calling for a praxis of knowing when to break shit, when to fix shit, and when to subvert shit. This praxis requires stakeholders in GSI advocacy to reflect on their local contexts and take *kairotic* action in solidarity.

WPAs, GSIs, and non-GSI writing faculty cannot transform labor conditions on their own. Indeed, in our observations, WPAs have largely assumed labor advocacy as a huge part of their role, and now that many of the authors of this article have transitioned into faculty and lecturer roles, we intend to do the same. For us, writing programs are one starting point for large-scale mobilization on behalf of GSIs, a generative home for the grad worker organization movements already brewing across the U.S.

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Furthermore, as we continue our advocacy work, the field of writing studies can consider how other systems of oppression—white supremacy, sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, colonialism—intersect with the experiences of GSIs in writing programs. Schell (2017) reminds us that labor "organizing strategies can break down if questions of white privilege and bodily difference are not addressed" (xvi). By keeping Schell's calls in mind, we can foreground the lived experiences of the most vulnerable GSI bodies in writing programs. In doing so, GSI organizers, WPAs, and writing faculty at all ranks can align our field's expressed values—diversity, equity, representation—with our daily practices, allowing GSIs from all backgrounds to thrive as teachers, scholars, and human beings.

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Notes

1. Data were collected in accordance with IRB Protocol #17-275 at Virginia Tech.

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