Like many in our field, I rose up “through the ranks” to my present position as a director of the Writing Center at a small, private college of pharmacy and health sciences. My career path started while I was pursuing an M.A. in English, where I tutored in the university’s Writing Center. Then, when I was back in school to complete a doctorate in education, I once again was given the opportunity to tutor in the university’s Writing Center, and, eventually, to study that Center as the subject of my dissertation. I graduated in the spring of 1996, and by the fall of that year I was hired by my current college to start its Writing Center. Four years later, I am a faculty member in the School of Arts and Sciences and hold administrative responsibility for the entire writing program, as well as for a new initiative on first-year student experience.

What a smooth path that narrative above seems to indicate, a path of increasing professional opportunities, from “novice” to “expert,” from tutor to director, from student to faculty member, a “transformation” of sorts that is easily the script that we would write for many in our field. But here is another way of telling that story:

My first writing center job came during my second semester of pursuing an M.A. in English/Creative Writing and a high school teaching credential. I would have preferred to be a TA and teach composition in the classroom, but most of my fellow graduate students were experienced teachers and gained the coveted TA positions. Instead, I tutored in the university’s Writing Center for $7 per hour, a rate that did not change in the three years that I worked there. I worked primarily with basic writing students, who came to the Writing Center as a course requirement and who were made to sift through a grammar/usage workbook, completing exercises on modals and subject/verb agreement and nouns and antecedents (which still happens, though now these exercises are computer...
based). Then, after working as an adjunct college English instructor for a few years, a path that held an uncertain future toward my goal of full-time employment, I moved to Boston, where my wife had been offered a faculty position. I took that opportunity to return to graduate school to pursue a doctorate in education. In my second year, I started working in the university’s Writing Center for $10 per hour (part-time, no benefits). My fellow graduate student tutors consented to participate in my dissertation research as I scrutinized their practice and tried to make sense of the complexity of tutoring writing. By the time I was finished with this degree, I felt like I knew a great deal about tutoring writing and only a little about running a writing center (all of which I gleaned from the listserv WCenter; the Writing Center I had studied did not have a director per se—all staff reported to the director of a larger resource/tutoring center), but that didn’t stop me from applying for my current job. Here’s the text of the original ad:

Writing Center Coordinator (Half Time): The Division of Arts & Sciences at the Mass. College of Pharmacy is seeking an indiv. to assist composition faculty in diagnosis/remediation of writing problems among ESL and native writers of English; recruit, train & supervise peer tutors; provide direct tutoring services. M.A. in writing/rhetoric, specialized training in ESL & exp. using writing process approach with ESL and native writers of English and the ability to work with a diverse student body needed. This is a 20 hr/wk, 9 month appointment offering a competitive salary. Start 8/27 with renewal contingent upon funding.

So after nearly ten years of post-baccalaureate schooling and three degrees, I would be thankful to have a part-time job with contingent funding. I would be an “indiv.,” a writing center director, a member of a profession and/or field and/or discipline and/or “movement” (Simpson “What Lies Ahead”) and/or “people” (Rafoth et al). Once I was offered the job, I barely blinked before accepting. It had been a long time since I had a salary, much less a “competitive one.” What I could not have realized was that first year on the job would include trying to find my place in an unknown context, managing the myriad details of setting up a writing center, enduring a 40% budget cut halfway through the year, interviewing for a more permanent position when it seemed as if I would not be renewed, and, finally, after not receiving a new job offer, having my job become a full-time faculty position primarily through the energies and leverage of my boss, who himself was being promoted to vice-president.

Perhaps the second telling of my narrative is more the example for our field. Many of us start as directors by wedging ourselves into any fissure the institution will show, gradually use a cycle of freeze and thaw
(generally, subject to the elements) to expand that fissure into a major crack, maybe even one with space for a few round tables, a desk, and a telephone. Indeed, even Muriel Harris, editor of *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and recent recipient of the CCCC Exemplar Award, started in a similar fashion back at Purdue in 1975. Harris reports that she was an unpaid volunteer at the start, as well as a “part-time lecturer in composition” and “a faculty wife with advanced degrees in Renaissance literature” (“A Multiservice Writing Lab” 2).

Some of us become full-fledged members of our institutions, gathering the status, compensation, and respect that membership offers. Others of us do not, for the path to “professionalization” is varied and uncertain. Certainly, one’s institutional standing is not necessarily dependent upon being a tenure-track faculty member. Many of us thrive as full-time staff or managers. Nevertheless, I believe the current state of our field is a bifurcated one with two tiers of writing center directors: those with institutional standing and those who remain as I began, as part-time, contingent labor subject to forces far beyond their control.

This article is my statement of “professional concerns,” to echo Jeanne Simpson’s exploration of this topic in 1985. I want to present the story of my first year as one way of reading the factors that both constrain and enable us to reach levels of professional status that ensure security and stability, both for us personally and for our field as a whole. Simpson told us to “ask ourselves just where we are and where we go from here” (“What Lies Ahead” 35). I want to ask: How did we get here, and where, exactly, are we?

**Writing Center Directors: The Search for Professional Status**

The subtitle above comes from Gary Olson and Evelyn Ashton-Jones’ 1988 *WPA* article (and reprinted in *Landmark Essays in Writing Centers*) in which they surveyed “188 Freshman English directors across the nation” to see how those respondents characterized the role of the writing center director: teacher, scholar, or administrator. What they found was that “freshman English directors are more likely to view the writing center director simply as an administrator, not as a teacher, a scholar, or even a writing specialist” (48).

The authors saw this perspective as a particular problem in the system of rewards unique to higher education. In what can be read as a not-too-subtle swipe at academic administrators who are disciplinary scholars first and competent administrators only reluctantly, Olson and Ashton-Jones write,
The center director’s status reflects and represents the status of the center itself, and status in academe derives from scholarly credentials. Typically administrators—university provosts, department chairs, even freshman English directors—all prove themselves first as competent scholars before being given the responsibilities of administration. To the extent that these values do not apply to writing center directors, we can assume that the center director and the center itself are not valued in the academic community. (50)

For Olson and Ashton-Jones, the equation is fairly clear: institutional status is equal to the girth of one’s curriculum vitae, and writing center directors’ assumedly closest allies, writing program administrators, continue to reject our efforts to show we belong to the club. Sure, we can run the writing center, but that’s not “true” scholarly work!

This quest for “professional status” in the eyes of our like-minded colleagues—writing program administrators—has roots earlier than 1988. At the 1981 CCC’s meeting in Dallas, the membership passed the following resolution:

Whereas fulltime professionals holding advanced degrees are widely employed by institutions of higher education to provide individualized instruction in writing labs; whereas these writing lab professionals are not always accorded faculty status by their institutions and, hence, are subject to inequities in workload, in remuneration, and in career protection:

Therefore, be it resolved that the 1981 CCC affirms that fulltime writing lab professionals holding advanced degrees under contract to institutions of higher education be accorded the same rights—equitable workloads, remuneration, and access to tenure—as other faculty members. (“CCCC Secretary’s Report” 344)

While this resolution addressed the “fulltime professionals” in our field, the many part-time folks who were running writing centers were not yet served. Diana George and Nancy Grimm encountered these directors in the “late seventies” when they attended a meeting of the Eastern Regional Writing Centers Association and met “people working daily in large and small writing centers run by untenured faculty and part-time faculty and sometime staff and full-time graduate and undergraduate students” (59).

This group of contingent labor would have to wait another four years for a position statement that addressed their concerns. By that time the National Writing Centers Association took up the cause under then Vice-President Jeanne Simpson. In her 1985 Writing Center Journal article, Simpson acknowledges that writing centers have won “a battle” of
sorts, but warns against complacency. "The isolation of individual writing centers has ended," she tells us, citing the existence of the national and local writing center associations. However, "writing center directors still face a struggle to move out of positions of relative powerlessness" (35). To deal with this situation, the NWCA produced a "position statement on professional concerns" because "presenting writing center directors as professionals is, in fact, one of the most important tasks facing the writing center movement" (36). The statement asserts that "the National Writing Centers Association opposes the hiring of part-time faculty as directors unless they are given full access to the rights, privileges, and services available to regular faculty" (36). In addition, it asserts that "directorships should be considered faculty and administrative positions rather than staff positions" and "directorships should include access to promotion, salary, tenure, and travel funds equivalent to that provided for other faculty and administrators" (37).

That was 15 years ago. Lest we believe that the landscape has been radically transformed since then, I offer a job advertisement that ran about a year and a half ago in The Boston Globe. This large, private university was seeking "to fill four benefits-eligible, full-time Lecturer positions," and one of these is described as "Director of the Writing Laboratory." Okay, full-time sounds good; "lecturer" could at least hold faculty rank. Then one reads, "Lecturers in these positions teach between seven and nine courses per year, at an annual salary of up to $19,440. In addition, the lecturers in these positions will receive a $2,000 administrative stipend for service during each of the three regular academic quarters of the year, or $6,000 in all." Thus, for no more than $25,440, this Writing Lab Director will be teaching as many as three courses per quarter (which is a full-time course load at this institution) plus directing the Writing Center. After deducting the minimum federal and state taxes, this professional's yearly income should be around $20,000. Considering that a one-bedroom apartment in the Boston area (if you can find one, that is) rents for about $1,200 per month, this professional is left with $467 per month to spend on food, medical care (there is no mention of benefits in the job ad), car payments, auto insurance, and parking, as well as résumé paper to search for a more "professional" position.

Is this position an anachronism of an earlier era before the creation of regional and national associations and the issuing of position statements? In 1992, Peter Carino wrote, "We need only cite examples in job advertisements for directors to know that in many quarters centers are still perceived as remedial fix-it shops run by the underpaid who cannot find jobs elsewhere" (39). Is his observation a thing of the past? I would like to think so, but a great deal of evidence indicates otherwise. In their 1999 survey of the directors of "small college writing centers," Shireen Carroll, Bruce Pegg, and Stephen Newmann report that 35% of respondents held
faculty appointments and that only 23% held tenure-track appointments. They compare these figures with Dave Healy’s 1993 survey of writing center directors nationwide. Healy found that 69% of directors held faculty appointments and 46% were tenure-track. One more data point is a much earlier survey conducted by Patricia Murray of DePaul and Linda Bannister of Loyola Marymount, who found in 1985 that only 32% of respondents (culled from the subscriber list to The Writing Lab Newsletter) held tenure-track positions.

I am in no way claiming that the populations surveyed in these three studies are equivalent. However, there are two ways to read those differences: the finding that relatively few writing center directors hold tenure-track positions—whether in small colleges, centers nationwide, or from Writing Lab Newsletter subscribers—is true over different populations and thus quite pervasive. On the other hand, the institutional need for such status can be vastly different given the size of the institution or the institution’s culture (i.e., how faculty-centered or how administratively centralized it might be). Tenure-track status might not necessarily be the mark of professionalism that all in our field should aspire to (though it continues to be the benchmark in other academic disciplines). However, these survey results do indicate quite a few potholes in the terrain and lend evidence to the idea that our field is bifurcated into the “haves” and the “have-nots.”

It is also important to point out that the return rate for all of these surveys was fairly low (50.7% for Healy, 32.8% for Carroll, Pegg, and Newmann, and 30% for Murray and Bannister). It makes one wonder about those surveys not returned. Were those directors simply too tied up with their day-to-day professional lives, or is their lack of response an indication of their lack of professional standing? In other words, it is not hard to imagine those survey letters lying unopened in a college’s mailroom. After all, having a mailing address is a mark of professional status, and part-time, adjunct, and graduate student directors of writing centers do not always achieve such distinction or feel included enough to respond to such surveys.

Another mark of professional status referenced in several articles is the growth of the national and regional writing center associations. However, the evidence for growth becomes puzzling when examined more closely. It is difficult to dispute that fact that writing centers have proliferated over the last twenty-five years. Many of us could name many more new ones than ones that have shut down. Yet, those directors in charge of these new writing centers are not necessarily becoming card-carrying members of the National Writing Centers Association, of their regional associations, or even subscribers to writing-center related journals. In her “personal history of the first decade” of the NWCA, Joyce Kinkead reports that in 1990, her minutes for the NWCA meeting in
Atlanta show “a membership of 830 with a healthy treasury” (138). I can personally attest (as the NWCA Treasurer since 1997 and thus keeper of the membership database) that the NWCA’s current membership hovers around 425. Thus, the national membership has actually dropped by nearly half in the last ten years!

Of course, these numbers could be explained in a couple of ways: perhaps the counting of members was done differently in 1990 (and was tied to journal subscriptions rather than a separate membership fee), or perhaps the growth of regional writing center associations meets the needs of writing center directors and precludes them from joining the national organization (Harris personal e-mail). But, perhaps, another reading of these figures is that new writing centers are being run by directors who start out relatively disenfranchised from the regional and national scene. I can anecdotally verify this claim based upon my meetings with Boston-area writing center directors, many of whom have never heard of the national organization or the publications. Of the two more substantial pieces of evidence for this claim, one comes from Carroll, Pegg, and Newmann’s survey. When respondents were asked “How might the NWCA provide support for . . . small college writing centers?” 33% had no response, leading the authors to write, “this suggests large publicity problems for NWCA and, arguably, considerable gaps in terms of professional development for small site directors” (5). For the other piece of evidence, I return to Kinkead, who reported that “by 1981, the WLN had over 1,000 subscribers” (133) (a number confirmed by Murray and Bannister in 1985). Nearly twenty years later and after the opening of scores of new writing centers, that number of subscribers is about the same—1,000 (Harris personal e-mail). (Incidentally, there are just over 1000 subscribers to the field’s other major publication, The Writing Center Journal, and while that publication’s membership does include a substantial number of individual subscribers, many of these belong to institution libraries”) (DeCiccio personal e-mail).

One conclusion to draw from these numbers is that the growth of writing center professionals has not meant a growth in their “professionalism” as defined by professional association and subscription to relevant journals. It seems the new generation of writing center directors is not plugged in to the channels created for them. Kinkead writes that “in some respects, the NWCA saw itself as something of a labor union, offering professional support to those whose labs or positions were in crisis” (137). Perhaps stagnant growth says something more about the function of the professional association rather than the professionals, or perhaps those “crises” have become a thing of the past as writing center directors are embraced as full-fledged members of their institutions. Or perhaps this contradiction between enfranchisement and disenfranchisement is what characterizes our field. In the 1990 ten-year anniversary edition of The
Writing Center Journal, Muriel Harris was interviewed about the status of writing center directors and notes, "It has helped that so many writing center positions are now tenure track positions and that many directors now are tenured. The reality, it seems to me, is that we're less the underdog than we used to be" (8). Twelve pages later, in her own article on "Trends and Traditions in Writing Centers," Harris writes that "we traditionally have been the field hands waiting at the back door for a few scraps from the table of the real folk dining inside" (20). Had this "tradition" been overturned by 1990? Harris offers the following:

One way to see how others view the role of being a writing center director is to look at job postings. One that I recently received was from a university seeking someone with experience in writing assessment who could also teach undergraduate and graduate courses in rhetoric. And by the way, that person will be a half-time lab director responsible for training tutors, developing materials, etc. That may sound like a job that would best be filled by several people, but someone will take it. Writing center administration is still too often something we are supposed to do with our left hand while focusing our "quality time" on all of our other responsibilities. (29)

Thus, for those on the tenure track comes a whole host of other "professional" responsibilities, making those winsome days as a non-affiliated adjunct seem downright heavenly.

Is this the current state of the professional landscape—a two-tiered system of a large number of part-time or staff writing center directors coupled with an overworked tenure-track group? Consider this recent job advertisement:

Director of the Writing Center. Responsibilities include: establish and maintain the writing center, promote writing within the [college] curriculum, assist in hiring writing faculty, develop and implement tutoring program, and produce and administer writing tests. Applicants should be able to interact w/variety of constituencies, prioritize multiple tasks, and work as a team member.

What this ad does not mention is that the position is a half-time, staff appointment (and currently held by a former Writing Consultant of mine!). The next ad is more explicit about limited work hours:

Boston-area law school seeks a writing coordinator for its academic support program. This is a part-time position, requiring 15-20 hours per week during both the fall and spring semester. Duties
include administering the program, training & supervising student tutors, conferencing with students, diagnosing writing problems, evaluating student writing, & lecturing on exam-writing techniques.

Certainly, one can find descriptions on the MLA job list that are more ideal in terms of status, duties, and remuneration. But those are the jobs for the "upper tier," not for the "lower tier" who respond to ads that run in the local papers, a labor force that cannot pack up and move to a new time zone or is not even plugged into the notion of writing center directing as anything more than a part-time, administrative job.

Fifteen years since Simpson's NWCA Position Statement, 19 years since the 4C's resolution, and 25 years since Harris' humble start as a volunteer faculty wife, the current state of writing center professionalism—as indicated by full-time employment and tenure-track status—is uneven at best. Why is this so? And is it necessarily a problem?

**Barriers to Professional Status**

The continuing dilemma of writing center directors' quest for professional status has multiple causes. In her historical reading of writing centers, Beth Boquet presents the tension between writing centers as "site" or "where work is dropped off and picked up, where students are brushed off and cleaned up" and writing centers as "method" or "an interaction between people over time" (464). While the concepts of site/place versus method/practice are powerful lenses with which to view our work, I want to introduce one additional framework: people. After all, the history of writing centers is the history of those who have started, sustained, and promulgated this work (as publications such as Kinkead and Harris' *Writing Centers in Context: Twelve Case Studies* and "An Interview with the Founding Editors of The Writing Center Journal" demonstrate). The third "p" that is people (following Boquet's use of "place" and "practice") has often been neglected in our literature. If anything, the writing center itself is often presented as an anthropomorphic entity, somehow void of the person or persons who lead it. Consider the statement that "many writing centers continue the never-ending struggle to convince their institutions that they are more than marginal facilities catering to marginalized students" (Barnett 129). Just who is it that will be making those arguments? In his review of *Writing Centers in Context*, Brad Hughes briefly wondered if the contributors might have addressed "how much they and their predecessors contributed to or determined the success of their program" (177). After all, Hughes writes, "a director's strong leadership and stability can play a vital role in a
program's success” (177). And the converse is also true—weak leadership and instability can lead to a writing center’s failure, conditions that result from a director’s lack of institutional and professional status.

Placing blame upon ourselves is not necessarily a new phenomenon. Is the problem that we alienate ourselves from administrators because we do not use an “accurate, no-nonsense style of writing and speaking appropriate for addressing the concerns of a writing laboratory” and are too focused on “separation and self-congratulation” (9), as Irvin Hashimoto claimed back in 1982? Is “the problem of defining our professional status . . . , ultimately, ours to correct” (30), as Donald Bushman declared in 1991? I believe the reality is far more complicated, but our personal role in working toward institutional enfranchisement is not to be mitigated.

One contributing factor, at least in the Boston area, comes from the labor market itself. We are flooded with holders of the M.A., M.F.A., Ed.D., and Ph.D. degrees. The volume of responses I receive when advertising for writing center consultants or for adjunct faculty to pick up a section of composition is a frightening reminder of the glut of available labor and the underemployment of many of our colleagues. Just as I was eager for the opportunity, many others will leap at the chance for part-time employment, cobbling together multiple positions in our new economy’s version of full-time work. And once in these positions, we are faced with a conundrum—we do not have the institutional status to change our working conditions, and by virtue of the competence that we invariably show, we prove to our superiors that the position they have created is just fine! Muriel Harris identified this problem back in 1990: “Too many of us have a tradition of letting ourselves be sold short. We find our compensation in our work, knowing that what we do is effective and right, but that shouldn’t deter us from taking stronger stances in demonstrating that the needs of our writing centers are legitimate and that our work should be valued as a major responsibility” (“What’s Up, What’s In” 20). Near the end of my journal of my first year, I wrote about the fact that it looked like my contract for the next year would be at 3/4 time, but that I would be paid less than three-quarters of a full-time salary. I wrote, “[financing is] one of my least favorite things to bring up with others—I complain about being financially exploited but I can be a large reason for that exploitation. Is this typical of the writing center mentality? We just want to get along, not rock boats, build coalitions, do right by the students, blah blah blah. Sounds like the ingredients for exploitation to me.”

We invest considerable amounts of our lives into our writing centers, and were we to leave for whatever reasons, I strongly believe that our writing centers would either cease to exist or become far different places. That latter choice is not necessarily bad, but it is an indication to me just how our writing centers are an extension of us, rather than
institutional entities with security and status. In my own situation, if I were to leave my position, it is likely that “my” Writing Center would again be run by a half-time adjunct. This is not necessarily a conspiracy on the part of my administration to keep the Writing Center and its director disenfranchised; it is simply a fiscal reality. My full-time faculty line could easily be carved up for something else, and the Writing Center could easily be funded through less expensive means, such as adjunct faculty salaries. The Writing Center is not a “cost center” per se, does not generate revenue by giving course credit (as few do), and is not plugged into established institutional means of maintaining security. I am plugged in because of my faculty status, but that only provides a measure of security for me, not for the long-term existence of the Writing Center (all conditions I am working to change).

What I am also arguing here is that the very conditions under which many of our part-time, graduate student, and staff colleagues work prevent them from gaining the sort of institutional view, much less the institutional leverage to change their status. Two excerpts from my first-year journal are particularly telling:

November 8, 1996: One disturbing aspect of this job is that the schmoozing/PR part of my time is taking on heightened significance, and that’s the least appealing part of what I do. Unfortunately, I must rely on my boss at this point to find out what the pharmacy curriculum is like and to arrange meetings with faculty in that division. I’m not sure he will follow up, and while I think I should contact these folks directly, I’m not quite sure if my boss is expecting me to do that or if he’ll think I’m overstepping my bounds as a part-time staff member and adjunct faculty. I’m concluding that I can’t worry about the latter; if it happens, I’ll simply apologize after the fact. I wasn’t tasked to do WAC. And my boss has told me several times how WAC just hasn’t taken off here.

April 24, 1997: I’ve learned a great deal this past year. Not just the nuts and bolts sorts of things about setting up, publicizing and running a Writing Center, but I’ve gained an “institutional” view. I can see how the writing center can be that “center for writing consciousness” that Stephen North prophesied in “The Idea of a Writing Center.” I couldn’t see that a year ago. I was much more concerned with tutoring practice, with making sure that the Writing Center could be a place where teaching and learning went on. Those are of course still concerns, but I’ve had to adjust my focus on making the Writing Center part of the college culture. This is a cultural anthropologist’s job in many ways.
In these two entries, I show both the constraints and the necessity of the “institutional” view that I described in the April excerpt. It took me quite a few months to realize that I needed to take on that larger view, perhaps the result of starting a Writing Center in a place as relatively unfriendly to writing as a college of pharmacy and health sciences. It was really a survival strategy more than anything else. But as a part-timer I was limited in developing this view, limited by my lack of access, my lack of connection. Given my lack of experience, I did not yet realize that I needed to be plugged in. My journal comment after addressing the faculty for the first time during a pre-semester orientation was, “Not having a phone yet, office hours, or a schedule, I couldn’t yet distribute flyers and such, but I think I made the Writing Center known for a start.” Of course, no one could call me or know when to find the Writing Center (and only a few knew where to find it), but it was better than nothing!

One final barrier to achieving professional status is something that all of us quickly learn to be good at—to count. How many students? How many sessions? How many contact hours? In my first year, I seemed often to be in the role of ticket taster at the Writing Center turnstiles. Almost every journal entry starts with an account of usage:

September 13, 1996: Three students on Monday, three more on Tuesday (one of those a repeat), two on Wednesday (with another repeat), none yesterday, and one more so far today . . . . In terms of capacity, that’s 9 hours out of a possible 34. That’s a lot of free time! But it’s early yet. Patience.

October 10, 1996: After four weeks of writing centeredness, we have had 44 total new students, and over 65 total sessions.

November 1, 1996: On Monday, I’ll be meeting with my division director to talk about our usage up to this point.

December 12, 1996: Usage of the Writing Center has been very spotty. My thoughts and feelings range wildly on this front. Perhaps this college simply doesn’t need a writing center, I think in my darker moments. Perhaps these students and faculty simply haven’t figured out how to use a writing center, I tell myself.

From my vantage point, I felt that I needed to justify my Writing Center’s existence (and my job) by proving that students were coming to us and that when they did, we achieved positive results. Some of us go to the point of creating statistical arguments for our “effectiveness,” comparing the grades of students who use the writing center with those who do not, as Stephen Newmann and I have both done.

While these efforts are often worthwhile (the fact that I was interested in assessment in my first year was probably more important to my boss than the outcome of the study), they can become another barrier
to professional status. In our numeric dependency, we cede a great deal of our bargaining power. We are, in effect, giving up the terms with which we—and our centers—are evaluated. I am certainly guilty in this regard, as my recent Writing Center annual report will attest, but I cannot help but think that we need to spend more time explaining the many things that we do as directors and being rewarded for those activities, rather than tying our futures to usage. Certainly, we need to have students, staff, and faculty come through our doors, but the ways that writing centers and their directors become part of the intellectual and social fabric of our institutions is not easily measured by usage statistics.

The Risks of Professional Status

While the primary wave of voices decrying the state of professional status seemed to ebb about ten years ago, more recent warnings have been issued against “becoming co-opted by the larger system” (George and Grimm 62). In the view of these authors, the costs of professional—particularly disciplinary—status are dire, certainly not worth the benefits that might accrue.

George and Grimm, in their 1990 retrospective, tell us that “what we are in danger of losing as we move into a more centralized position on our campuses is the dialogic relationship that is characteristic of one-to-one instruction. Increased visibility, power, and responsibilities can serve to distance us from those student voices that changed our teaching in dramatic ways not so long ago” (61). In a similar vein (and in the same ten-year anniversary edition of The Writing Center Journal), Irene Clark implores us to “maintain and continue to value some of the ‘chaos’ of our early days” (82), which was “a time of openness and questioning of tradition, a time when exploration can lead to growth, discovery, and change” (82). Examined in the context of these professionals’ own high standing in the writing center community (as scholars and active members of their regional writing center associations and the NWCA), it is easy to imagine the soul searching that their relative security allowed. But to even entertain the possibility of selling out, one needs something to sell in the first place. For the many disenfranchised writing center directors, the possibility of more “centralized” roles is quite remote.

Another critique of the move toward professional status is the warning against the idea of writing centers as an academic discipline. Terry Riley compares the growth of writing centers with the development of the disciplines of American literature, literary theory, and composition studies and concludes, “power and status are purchased at a great price; and . . . if those of us devoted to the writing center concept follow the example of other groups, seeking stability in professionalization, we will
jeopardize the values that make our work meaningful” (21-22). For Riley, going “mainstream” means “entering into commitments that we will end up regretting” (29) and reducing “our variety and our breadth of vision” (30). Instead, Riley asks that “if we find a way of publicly rejoicing in our impermanence, we may preserve the energy and purpose. If not, we will almost certainly become, like everyone else, introverted and disciplinary” (32). This totalizing view of the academic mainstream is also articulated by Beth Boquet, who writes that “the writing center is most interesting to me for its post-disciplinary possibilities, for the contradictions it embraces, for its tendency to go off-task” (478). Boquet challenges us to ask, “What are we failing to imagine now for our writing centers?”

What is being left out of our discussions on teaching writing by our failure to account for the work of the writing center in a critically intellectual manner? And, conversely, what is being left out of our discussions on writing centers by our inability to account, in complex ways, for its relationship to the teaching of writing? By our continued insistence that writing centers give us simply the hard numbers, just the facts? (479)

Nancy Grimm, following the theme she established with Diana George six years earlier in The Writing Center Journal, tells us that we have not only “sold out” by going mainstream, but that we have become unwitting agents of literacy oppression while at the same time proclaiming “innocence.” Grimm writes that “we don’t always accomplish as much as we think we do and that in the long run we sometimes do more harm than good” (5).

So what is the writing center director to do, particularly the one who is hired on a part-time, contingent basis with the understandable goal of survival, much less the transformation of literacy practices? Grimm herself sees “time” as critical: “If writing center workers are going to come to terms with the regulatory uses of literacy, they will need to find the time to read and reflect in order to develop alternative language, new visions, and creative strategies for engaging with competing notions of literacy” (18). Indeed, time for reading and reflection is often a luxury to writing center directors who do not have the advantage of status and leverage or even full-time employment. And even were these well-meaning folks to develop “visions” and “strategies,” how would they prevail upon their institutions to make meaningful change? Bring it up at a curriculum committee meeting, perhaps? But unfortunately these writing center workers are not invited to such meetings, much less able to serve on institutional entities that are part of the process of change.

Overall, I do not disagree with Riley, Boquet, and Grimm, but how can you face up to the dangers of your own authority if that authority
itself does not exist? Concerns about “going mainstream” come from a
certain point of privilege or relative stability. For many of us, reaching that
level of comfort should be our first goal. Again, my fear is a two-tiered
system of writing center directors with an enfranchised class instituting
barriers to enfranchisement (in their rejection of established means of
obtaining status) and a disenfranchised class increasingly populating the
new writing centers that are created in the face of pressures to eliminate
“remedial” coursework or, more recently, the outsourcing of writing
center services (DeCiccio) and thus offering the service without even
needing a writing center director!

One Lucky Professional

At one point early in my first year, I made the following comment
in my journal: “I keep trying to think of something more theoretical to
write about, but my mind is entrenched in the practical. Quite a switch after
writing the dissertation.” When Joan Mullin read an earlier version of this
article, she picked up on my comment and responded that “you can’t
manage a writing center without doing it from a theoretical perspective—
even though everything that results looks practical. A viable center HAS
to have theory behind its construction; you can’t just have any ‘manager’
run a successful center.” In my first year, as a part-time, contingent writing
center director, I did not have the space, time, or experience to realize the
theoretical perspective I was bringing to my work. Sure, I wanted my
Writing Center to continue, partially for self interest—I was darn tired of
eight years of adjunct work and wanted a full-time job. But I am in this
field not merely to have a job; instead, like many of us, I believe in the
transformative potential of higher education, generally, and of writing, in
particular. I am passionate about teaching and learning and find some of
the greatest expressions of those endeavors in my work in the Writing
Center. The theories that guide our practice—a belief in the social
construction of knowledge and an understanding of rhetorical prin-
ciples—also guide our management. However, our application of these
theories of learning needs to come from positions of relative stability and
security, and our positions within the institution need to be theorized in the
face of what we know about hierarchies and institutional leverage and
change. Michael Burawoy describes this theory-building as a process in
which

we search for theories that highlight some aspect of the situation
under study as being anomalous and then proceed to rebuild (rather
than reject) that theory by reference to the wider forces at work, be
they the state, the economy, or even the world system. (6)

As applied to writing center work, the wider forces might be aspects of our institutions that challenge us to think about constructivist theory, feminist theory, or developmental theory in new ways that respond to—and potentially reshape—our local contexts. In other words, theory itself can be one way to meet the challenges of attaining professional status.

Professional status as equated with institutional security and leverage can come in many forms in many different contexts. A writing center director who is in a full-time staff position can be just as influential in an institution as can a tenured faculty member (or both can be equally lacking in influence). The paths toward enfranchisement can be varied, perhaps a reflection of the interdisciplinary nature of writing centers. Are they placed in English Departments? As part of larger Teaching and Learning Centers? In Student Affairs or in Academic Affairs? Whatever the placement, the key for institutional status is to be as close to the money as possible, as Jeanne Simpson has reminded us ("Assessing Needs" II.2.4). My position as two steps from the Provost (I report to the Dean of Arts and Sciences, who reports to the Provost) was not necessarily a careful strategic move on the part of those who created my job. Instead, because a faculty member in Arts and Sciences had retired and because the existing Learning Center director had not shown much interest in writing tutoring, my boss used half of that faculty line to pay my salary and the other half to pay the salary of my staff. And this was the line I was able to move into once I became full-time the next year (and my staff salary budget had to then come from a different budget line). These were fortuitous circumstances for me, and ones entirely out of my control.

One NWCA-sponsored strategy to increase our professional status has been efforts to establish a national accrediting system for writing centers (Law). The argument is that by establishing minimum national standards (which the earlier position statements essentially did) and calling in a team of outside evaluators, those part-time, contingent writing center directors can say to their administrations, "Look, we’re way behind the curve here. Ante up!" While this effort has some merit, it has repeatedly become mired in concerns about "local context." There might simply not be a set of national standards that can address the many international variations of writing centers. And what about those administrators who ignore the site visit? These are important concerns, and as a result, the movement toward accreditation has instead become an effort at providing a set of self-assessment tools (see http://faculty.winthrop.edu/tarversj/NWCA/nwcdraft.htm for more information). Perhaps a more strategic move would be for the NWCA and the WPA to educate regional accrediting bodies, those folks with the real leverage. If regional accrediting teams were looking for specific conditions for writing center
directors—just as they do for faculty/student ratios and classroom space—the proliferation of part-time, contingent writing center directors (as well as the outsourcing of writing center services) could be curtailed.

Near the end of my first-year journal, when I was waiting to hear if I would be offered the full-time job that I had interviewed for, I wrote, “When I think back at my original idea of keeping this journal, it seems that I always suspected that it would end with me leaving this job—whether by not getting renewed or by taking another position. I don’t know which possibility seemed more likely, but that’s just a fitting end, one that gives a certain sort of closure.” Fortunately, I was wrong. Instead of closure, I was offered opportunity, a far better outcome in my view. Perhaps that is the “confession” that my title alludes to—I have made it while many others have not; a colleague at a neighboring institution meets with me to discuss the creation of their new writing center and then tells me that the director will be a part-time graduate student paid an hourly wage. I take a copy of the job description and tell my colleague that I will pass it on should I meet anyone interested. It sits, now, on my desk, a tangible sign of how far I have come and how far many have to go.

In searching for solutions to the dilemmas of professional status, I turn to the lessons William Yahner and William Murdick draw in their history of the Writing Center at California University of Pennsylvania: “We must recognize our vulnerability, our penetrability, and prepare to live politically if we are to continue to grow as progressive resources within secondary and higher education” (26). When we are part-time, contingent labor, we have little political leverage and are most vulnerable. It is incumbent upon those of us who have achieved positions of relative power to work at transforming, not just our own institutions, but at closing the divide between the class of writing center directors who have “made it” and those, often unheard, whose working conditions are barriers to professional advancement and institutional change.

Notes

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