

2023

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Recommended Citation

Faison, Wonderful and Glushko, Tatiana (2023) "Beyond the Two-Tiered System: Contingency as a Tool for Academic Upward Mobility," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 41 : Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1976>

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Beyond the Two-Tiered System: Contingency as a Tool for Academic Upward Mobility

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Abstract This article explores the scholarly endeavors upon which writing center directors and coordinators must embark to effectively run their centers. Additionally, the authors explore ways to use their contingent statuses as leverage for either tenure or promotion by linking their scholarly work to departmental and university tenure/promotion requirements.

Keywords contingency, tenure, promotion, writing centers

Quite often, contingency is a dirty word, if not in academia, then for academics. Consequently, contingent writing center directors, employees, and often the writing center itself are seen as nothing more than a service. While this assumption is incorrect, at worst, and a shallow understanding of the purpose of the writing center, at best, the lack of understanding of the role of the writing center and the people therein is not the reason that many writing center directors often have a contingent status. In fact, as Dawn Fels (2017) shows, “economic efficiency was the motivating factor” (p. 123) and “when economic efficiencies must be gained, it is easier to cut a contingent director and either not replace them or replace them with another employee who is already on the payroll” (p. 123). Therefore, it is urgent that institutions move beyond their two-tiered system and either provide contingent writing center directors with tenure-track lines (TT) or paths to promotion and job permanency.

The rationale to move beyond academia’s two-tiered system is that contingent jobs “are

insecure, unsupported positions with little job security and few protections for academic freedom” (American Association of University Professors, n.d., para. 1). Contingent workers, of whom there are many in academia, are the backbone of the institution, specifically the research institution. Contingency within academic institutions is sustained because it is extremely difficult (though not impossible) for tenured and tenure-track scholars to research, attend conferences, bring in grants, and publish if they must teach four to six classes a semester. Consequently, “the privileged few create and sustain contingency because contingency keeps their time, salaries, benefits, and jobs safe, stable, and intact” (Dawn Fels et al. 2021, p. 356). Although contingent workers are the backbone of the research institution, they are often excluded from many of the decisions that impact how they work, teach, and research.

Neal Lerner posits that contingent faculty are not provided the same opportunities to serve “on graduate studies committee, undergraduate studies committee, tenure-review committee within the department . . . , and Faculty Senate, all positions that ask for

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a fairly broad institutional view” (as cited by Fels, 2017, p. 123). However, we contend that many writing center directors are provided with these same opportunities. In the writing center, research and scholarship must be produced to provide professional, equitable, and pedagogically sound tutoring spaces and practices. Yet, Emily Isaacs and Melinda Knight (2014) found that 71% of writing center directors held nontenurable positions and 81% of writing centers were staffed by peer tutors (p. 48). While these numbers do not paint contingency in a good light, we argue that contingency does have benefits—benefits that if appropriately leveraged could lead to promotion or tenure and promotion.

If scholars and specifically writing center directors/coordinators are contingent workers who must do the same work (if not more) as tenured or tenure-track employees, then the institution should provide a path to promotion. This promotion can be to a tenure-track line or a permanent faculty position within the institution. Permanent faculty positions are not reserved for only the tenured. There are contingent faculty who do not worry about job security but worry about being provided the institutional support (and sometimes respect) that is given to tenured or tenure-track faculty. To substantiate our claim, we show how the realities of the professional lives of writing center practitioners may present case studies for rethinking institutional structures for promotion and recognition. We hope that by using narratives to recount our experiences as a contingent writing center director and writing center coordinator, we can articulate how contingent workers contribute to scholarship (on par with tenure-track faculty) and propose and advocate for equitable ways (beyond tenure) for making these contributions visible and recognized by their institutions. The first narrative focuses on the preconceptions we bring to writing center work from our graduate programs and how that preconception bumps against the realities of that work, while the second narrative focuses on the misconceptions about writing center work.

Although Fels et al. (2021) note the need to reduce the “professional and programmatic risks” contingent writing center work can

pose (p. 357), such as a lack of job security and recognition, Lacey Wootton (2020), conversely, explores how those who are seemingly powerless, in this case, contingent writing center directors, find ways to speak truth to power despite these contradictions (A. 6), often acting as “middlemen” between administration and students (A. 6). Through this speaking out, contingent writing center directors and coordinators become visible. This visibility can lead a university or department to implement policies mandating that “each department develop a procedure for voting on the conversion of temporary faculty to the tenure track” (Lalicker & Lynch-Binieck, 2017, p. 91). It is within this context that we explore the ways contingent writing center directors can forge various paths to promotion and/or tenure.

Myths, Mirages, and Lore (Wonderful’s Narrative)

My doctoral program, like most, pushed us all to seek tenure-track positions. But what we were actively discouraged against was applying for contingent faculty/staff positions. Tenure-track jobs led to tenured positions. And tenured positions were the golden goose. In many ways, they still are. Even with the desire to get a tenure-track position, I knew as a new graduate student entering the job market that I might not get that tenure-track golden goose opportunity with my first job.

Luckily, I was offered a tenure-track job at a teaching university and an HBCU. I was thrilled. I was starting somewhere new. I had a five-year plan. Tenure was in sight. But it was not the tenure I was told about. I was told about tenure jobs with 1/1 or 2/2 course loads and tenure-track jobs that provided sabbaticals, research, and funded travel to academic conferences. I was at a tenure-track job where I was expected to teach five general education courses, research, publish, and attend conferences (mostly) on my dime.

However, even with the workload, when my department chair retired a semester after I was hired, I happily applied for the position of department chair not only because I had a vision for the department, but also

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because I wanted a reduced courseload so I could effectively research and publish. There was no way I could get tenure teaching five (or more) classes a semester. I didn't have time to breathe, let alone think. When I got the job as chair, my courseload was reduced to a 3/3 schedule. However, I taught six general education classes once because we didn't have enough instructors to cover them, even when instructors regularly taught more classes than their contracted courseload.

This was not the tenure track I had in mind.

While I maintained a desire to teach, research, and publish, the lure and mystique of tenure were replaced with the reality of teaching three to four undergraduate classes per semester, while chairing a department, while researching and publishing, while redesigning curriculum and assessments, and all while serving on this committee and being in that capacity. I needed a job that gave me less of a teaching load and more ability to hone, refine, and professionalize my other skills that are not connected to everyday teaching.

Leaving that tenure-track job as an assistant professor of English and the department chair for a contingent writing center directorship was a significant risk. Yet, I found a contingent writing center directorship, with a significantly reduced workload, that would also be integral to implementing various elements of the schools' WAC/WID initiatives. Additionally, upon arriving at my new institution, I was put on the graduate comprehensive exam committee, the undergraduate writing committee, and a first-year design committee. Lastly, I began work with Academic Affairs on graduate student writing initiatives, for example, assessing graduate writing; revising the graduate proposal, thesis, dissertation, and capstone project guidelines; creating graduate writing workshop courses; training and funding new graduate writing advisors (formerly tutors), and more.

In my new nontenured writing center directorship, the perception of security (or rather my insecurity about my position) remained. Yet, my new institution trusted me to impact or even lead university-driven writing initiatives. The vice provost instructed me to create a graduate writing initiative to research and

analyze graduate student writing and implement workshops, train graduate writing advisors (tutors), and design curriculum changes that professionalize proposals, theses, and dissertations. This situation is not unique. The institution relies on all its employees, especially its academics (yes, all of them), to remake/reshape curriculums and assessments. Indeed, the very way we educate. The difference is security or at least the perception of it.

Through this work and the work I am continuously asked to produce, I realized that essentially, I was being tasked with tenure-track work without the tenure-track line. In fact, my institution already implemented three of the policy changes William B. Lalicker and Amy Lynch-Binieck (2017) outlined for fair labor practices for contingent faculty: advertising for and hiring "real compositionists" (p. 93), giving contingent faculty access to the "complete collegial life of the department" (p. 96) and/or university—such as serving on committees—and supporting "contingent faculty for whom the tenure track means embracing composition as not just a teaching assignment, but as a scholarly endeavor" (p. 99).

Having some of these recommendations in place, my new institution—or at least its provost—did not want a writing center that functioned solely as a service to or an extra appendage of the university or the English department. Admittedly, even after North's "The Idea of a Writing Center," some faculty still believe that functioning as a lab is the role the writing center should play. Yet, if upper administration, and in my case the vice provost, envisioned the writing center as a site of research, scholarship, and curriculum innovation, then it is on this vision and my ability to meet it that I would propose my current contract be rewritten and I be placed on a tenure-track line.

Defining a Writing Center Professional: Teaching, Research, Service, but No Promotion? (Tatiana's Narrative)

My trajectory as a writing center practitioner began 15 years ago with my transition into a

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new culture, language, and field during my graduate studies in the United States. I do not recall receiving any guidance on how I might build my academic career post-graduation. I was still trying to find my bearings and did not even know how to seek guidance and what questions to ask. Having worked as a graduate tutor in the writing center at the institution where I did my graduate studies, I was offered a coordinator's position at the same writing center. At that time, this position also involved teaching two first-year writing courses per semester. I was excited because it was my first full-time job in the United States. The writing center offered a comfortable workplace where my cultural and linguistic differences were not only accepted but seen as an asset and where there were seemingly abundant opportunities for applying my previous education and experience as a teacher of English in Russia and my U.S. education as a master of arts in English and PhD in higher education.

Since that first appointment, the funding and reporting structure of the center has changed a few times, and my position has changed its name from Coordinator of Supplemental Instruction to Coordinator and Office Manager. Twice during my work at this writing center, I served as Interim Director. "Attrition and dismissal are by-products of contingency," Fels (2017, p. 121) writes. I, however, have stayed in my contingent position for over 12 years, providing the center's administrative continuity to a succession of four directors. This paradox of permanency in a contingent position suggests that contingency may not always imply the prospects of losing one's job but of remaining permanently in a position unsupported by any promotion structure, as it has been in my case.

What also remained constant throughout my years in a full-time non-tenure-track position has been that my work organically prompted me to engage in teaching, research, and service, commitments that are expected of tenure-track faculty rather than staff members. The misalignment of the actual work requirements and the ones on the official job description was not, of course, lost on the center directors. Yet, every time we considered bringing up this issue with the previous

administration, the university would find itself in another financial exigency that would remind us about the precariousness of our positions and would make any negotiations untimely.

Most of the time I have felt that I have the relative "freedom, flexibility, and autonomy" to practice my profession at my institution, as other contingent writing center workers noted (Fels et al., 2021, p. 364). But I was also wondering if these conditions justify the lack of opportunities within the institution for professional development and self-actualization, promotion and career growth, and greater financial security. Carol Lind and Joan Mullin (2017) write: "Contingent faculty often have the same experience and research curiosities as their tenure-track counterparts, but rarely have the same opportunities to continue their professional growth" (p. 13). Echoing their statement, my case illustrates that writing center professionals who do not even have an official faculty status may also have the same experience and research curiosities as their tenure-track colleagues but often no pathways for upward academic mobility. If "the two-tier system fails to offer equity to all workers" (Fels et al., 2021, p. 377), what pathways might allow writing center professionals to reach their full potential? And how might they develop a more definitive stance from which to argue for greater flexibility of the institutional ranking and promotional structure to reflect the realities of their working lives?

The word "help" that students, faculty, and administrators often use to describe what we do in the writing center seems to imply that our work is supplemental to teaching. In fact, it is a distinct kind of teaching rooted in collaborative one-to-one pedagogy that requires writing center professionals to understand the needs of and to find an individual approach to each student. Preparing writing advisers for the center also means more than training. One graduate student who recently took our tutor training course shared that her initial expectation was that she would learn about the center's operations and tutoring techniques; however, the training far exceeded her expectations because it was a real graduate-level course. Teaching in the writing

center setting embodies what is often referred to as best practices in higher education: collaborative learning, peer learning, critical inquiry, and reflective practice—practices that are recognized as improving the student learning experience and persistence toward graduation. My teaching experience in the writing center included the following, to name a few:

- offering for-credit courses. For example, our writing center is a site for teaching two tutor education courses.
- designing programming for writing support for undergraduate and graduate writers
- developing syllabi, course materials, and writing resources
- providing feedback to students on their writing and to peer tutors on their tutoring
- engaging students in research and traveling with them to conferences
- writing letters of recommendation for students applying to graduate schools
- serving as members on a graduate student thesis committee
- implementing innovative educational practices. For example, the former writing center director and I, together with our colleague from the English department, developed a digital Open Educational Resource for a first-year composition course, in which we used archival materials available on our campus.

As the list demonstrates, even without the faculty standing or belonging to an academic department, writing center professionals engage in the kinds of work that faculty members in academic departments do.

Residing on the margins of academic affairs, we nevertheless seek participation in campus conversations and decision-making about the teaching of writing and about the writing center itself. For example, I have volunteered to serve on committees on general education and a quality enhancement plan (QEP), and a graduate student writing initiative. While serving on the University General Education Committee, besides participating in regular meetings and discussions, I facilitated

faculty focus groups and co-wrote narratives for general education pathways. As part of the university QEP committee, I led a subcommittee tasked with writing the literature review. My involvement with the initiative on graduate student writing requires participation in bimonthly meetings, analyzing graduate student writing samples, developing proposals for enhancing graduate writing support, and reviewing and providing feedback on documents generated by other members of the group.

To be able to do this from an authoritative position, we engage in research to have a better understanding of the history of composition instruction at our institution, the current instruction, and the kinds of writers we work with. And we have to publish, not only to develop our expertise and be part of our professional writing center community but also to demonstrate to the university administration that the writing center is an authoritative resource on writing pedagogy. For us the “fight for institutional credibility,” as Fels (2017, p. 120) refers to it, has been ongoing, especially considering that until recently, our university did not have writing specialists or writing across the curriculum programs, and the writing center was the only site of research on writing on campus.

Like tenure-track faculty in my field, I have conducted empirical research published in national journals and edited collections. Every year I have presented at professional conferences, from local and regional to national and international, on a few occasions paying out of pocket, including a trip to an international conference. I served as a managing editor of a journal on student affairs and as a reviewer for a local, institutional journal and an international journal. Furthermore, I have written grants with my colleagues and individually, from small travel grants to a larger federal grant, and have collaborated with a multidisciplinary team on revising a grant submitted by my university to one of the National Science Foundation programs. Continuing my development as a researcher, I also participated in the Dartmouth Summer Seminar for Composition Research, a two-week intensive summer institute where I learned to use more sophisticated ways for analyzing data in composition

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research, from coding streams of language to conducting a corpus linguistics analysis. Besides, I have been routinely providing feedback to colleagues at my institution on their manuscripts and grant proposals as well as to my international colleagues seeking language and writing for publication advice.

The commitments I have described above are, of course, in addition to running the center's day-to-day operations that comprise a gamut of administrative and managerial tasks as varied as managing writing advisers' schedules, running inventory reports, responding to students and faculty's inquiries, submitting work orders for repairs, and managing the center's website. While I have constructed my professional identity around teaching, research, and service, in which I find many intrinsic rewards, the intellectual labor involved, for example, in managing research projects or writing for publication is neither recognized nor remunerated by my institution.

Beyond the Two-Tiered System

While this comprehensive list by no means encompasses all that we do, it shows that our work is intellectually driven and rooted in theory, scholarship, and reason. The writing center is not just focused on technical or practical skills, and it never was. We argue that the writing center is not only a support service; it is also a scholarly discipline, and in some institutional settings, it functions more like an academic department. Thus, by aligning and positioning the writing center as an academic department that engages in teaching and training, researching, and publishing, we can better nuance and show why the institution should move beyond its two-tier system.

One way for contingent writing center employees to gain recognition and permanency is to tie their academic scholarship to the everyday operations of their writing centers. Since the writing center is seen as a "practical" and thereby untheorized and nonacademic space, it is necessary to make visible the connections between theory and praxis. To make these connections visible, contingent writing center employees should compose proposals to the chair

or dean, depending on to whom they report. The proposal should articulate the academic scholarship undertaken to effectively continue the day-to-day operations of the writing center. By connecting the writing center work to the academic scholarship (e.g., research, conference presentations, publications) that it takes to effectively operate the writing center, contingent writing center employees can build a case for more support, recognition, and, if desired, placement on a tenure-track line. It is equally important to show how the work outlined in these proposals aligns with the institution's tenure and promotion requirements and its overall university mission and goals.

If the writing center is connected to the English department, once the connection between the writing center employees' theoretical work, their practical work, and how that work aligns with tenure requirements is made, they should set up a meeting with the department chair and present the written proposal to them. If the department chair approves the transition to tenure track, the proposal will go to the dean, and then the provost for approval and contract restructuring. We understand that this scenario is ideal, but we have begun this process and are in the preliminary stages of having the writing center directorship at our institution become a tenured/tenure-track position.

Additionally, the risks of contingency for employees and institutions may also be minimized by creating alternative pathways for recognition and promotion. Those writing center professionals who are not tied to academic departments may advocate for revising their titles to reflect the teaching and scholarship dimensions of their work. For example, at our institution, librarians have a Library Instructor title added to the titles of their positions, but the writing center staff positions do not reflect the fact that they are also instructors. Based on credentials, the titles of writing center staff members may include designations such as Instructor, Assistant Professor, Teaching Professor, or Professor of Practice. Furthermore, these academic designations should be aligned with the institutional pay grade and take into consideration years of experience, professional accomplishments,

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and contributions to the institution. Equally important, teaching has to be explicitly stated as part of the job description. The responsibility of recruiting and training tutors, listed in job descriptions, should be revised to teaching tutor education courses.

These structural changes may prevent universities from losing their experienced and highly qualified staff members who may have to leave their jobs in search of higher pay and greater opportunities for professional growth, and this will ultimately save the university the expenses of having to replace these employees. Additionally, a faculty rank, especially if it is aligned with a tenure-track position, gives more leverage to writing center professionals to enact writing initiatives that they may be tasked with by college or university administrators. For example, we are both involved in the graduate writing support initiative on our campus; however, without faculty status, let alone tenure-track and graduate faculty member status, addressing problems with graduate student writing and leading the initiative may be problematic, if not impossible.

It is time for higher education institutions to recognize the labor of contingent employees and more importantly, contingent writing center employees. The two-tiered college system no longer works for everyday academics. Scholars and researchers are more than professors, and professors are more than just scholars and researchers, particularly at smaller institutions where they may be asked to do a lot of administrative tasks. The terms scholar, researcher, and professor extend to various academics, but specifically writing center employees, working in any institutional capacity that requires them to conduct research and publish to stay abreast of best practices for the centers/areas they run.

Wonderful Faison (Dr. Wonderful), PhD, is the director of the Richard Wright Center for Writing, Rhetoric, and Research. Her scholarship focuses on antiracist pedagogical practices in the writing center, as well as creating antiracist ethical assessments. Her publications include the book *Counterstories from the Writing Center*, the article “Race, Language, Literacy, and Retention: The Hidden Curriculum of the Writing Center,” the article “Full Disclosure: Black Rhetoric, Writing Assessment, and Afrocentric Rubrics,” and more.

Tatiana Glushko coordinates the work of the Richard Wright Center for Writing, Rhetoric, and Research at Jackson State University, where she tutors undergraduate and graduate students and trains writing advisors. Her current research interests include students’ rhetorical awareness, multilingual writing, and a metacognitive approach to listening in tutoring sessions. She also serves on the board of the Mississippi Writing Center Association.

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