

Fellowship for the Ring: A Defense of Critical Administration in the Corporate University

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The debate goes something like this. In corner one, critics argue that by creating full-time, non-tenure-track positions, writing program administrators are mimicking corporate tactics to build an Empire of Composition, a place where a few superstars win accolades and status, and the rest wallow in the pedagogical trenches. In corner two, WPAs push for equitable working conditions for the disproportionate segment of composition's labor pool paid part-time wages for full-time work. The conflict over non-tenure-track appointments has been escalating since the beginning of the decade: like the flame-throwing over the place of politics in the classroom we saw during the 1990s¹, the great debate of the '00s is the degree to which writing program administrators are complicit in the McJobbing of the University.

James Sledd and Joseph Harris wage this textual fistfight in the September 2001 issue of *College Composition and Communication* (CCC). The year previous, in "Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss: Class Consciousness in Composition," Harris argued that "rather than persisting in fantasies of escaping [a two-tier, second-class faculty] system" (51), we recognize that we "already have a third- or fourth-class faculty in place," and thus "should attempt to do better by [our non-tenure-track] colleagues" (66). While Harris spends some of his argument describing how the interests of many instructors are undermined by an obsession with tenure lines, at the heart of his piece is economic compromise: because inherited circumstances require most writing programs to staff courses with non-tenure-track faculty, WPAs should fight for a mitigated form of tenure for the non-tenure-track—that is, WPAs should strive to develop positions that afford instructors full-time status, equitable salary and benefits, and job security.

In the most on-the-nose commentary I've read since Maxine Hairston and John Trimbur duked it out over politics a decade before, Sledd

responds directly to Harris, characterizing WPAs—especially luminaries like Harris—as self-serving corporate climbers. As Sledd writes in “On Buying In and Selling Out: A Note for Bosses Old and New,” such luminaries are “the good professionals who accept the system uncritically, push hard for their own status and privilege, yet genuinely believe that they are liberators, empowerers, transformative intellectuals. They pave hell” (146). The wrath conveyed in Sledd’s writing, no doubt, comes both from his disdain for a multi-tiered faculty hierarchy and his belief that WPA-superstars have built their success on the backs of exploited labor—specifically, adjunct labor. The function of WPAs is not to resist labor exploitation, Sledd suggests, but to obey university administrators, revenue-driven bureaucrats who “want cheap labor and flexibility—and the chance to treat teachers like disposable diapers” (“Disciplinary” paragraph 24). Clearly, Sledd is distrustful of administrative bosses of any stripe, and highly suspicious of their intentions.

While rhetoric and composition lost a leader when it lost Sledd, and while I will miss his intelligent, pull-no-punches prose, this essay functions—at least in part—to reexamine his criticisms. Although I too find it reprehensible that some composition instructors are handled like polluted Pampers, the full-time, non-tenure-track positions Harris proposes in his essay—and those similarly developed in writing programs across the nation—have led not to the increased exploitation of composition instructors, but to exactly the opposite. In this essay, I draw on my work in the Department of Writing at Grand Valley State University, describing how the full-time non-tenure-track positions developed there helped me and others overcome the challenges many non-tenure track writing instructors face. In the pages that follow, I explore the problems of the budding professoriate, and describe how WPAs can work within corporate strictures to create more equitable working conditions for writing instructors reaching for the tenure-track, as well as for those who are not. Along the way, I examine current criticism waged against management models of writing program administration and argue that, although always influenced by institutional constraints, WPAs can be powerful advocates for traditionally exploited writing instructors.

PRE-PROFESSIONALISM, THE CORPORATE ACADEMY, AND GRADUATE EDUCATION: SOME PERSONAL HISTORY

I joined the Department of Writing at Grand Valley after my graduate stipend ran out. During my PhD studies, I attended a mid-sized public research university, one with a long-standing graduate program in English,

a newly developed concentration in rhetoric and composition, and a four-year limit on doctoral stipends. While I had no delusions of grandeur about the academic job market, I was committed to rhetoric and composition, and soothed by the word on the street: there were positions to be had in writing studies, a field which drew me to it because of its activist allegiances and emphasis on students, civic engagement, and political empowerment. Although I understood there were no guarantees, I reasoned I had a pretty good shot at breaking into the tenure-track.

So like most graduate students, I began my PhD program with a simple motto: *build your vita, the jobs will come*. I was genuinely excited when the graduate program awarded me a teaching assistantship. Although the pay was predictably lousy, I figured I could live on Ramen noodles for a few more years. To supplement my income and pay my way to professional conferences, I waited tables, trying—not always successfully—to stave off more student loans. During my third year I accepted a graduate student administrative assistantship. Yet unaware of the debate over the value of WPA work, it never occurred to me to construct my duties as a form of corporate kowtowing: contrary to the criticism waged at Boss Compositionists, I found administrative work politically empowering. It gave me a sneak peek into the mechanisms of university bureaucracy, allowed me to see how incremental change *was* possible, and taught me how I might become an agent in institutional reform. I had to quit waiting tables to make time for my new responsibilities, but administrative work enhanced my institutional acumen and professional qualifications. *Don't worry too much about the loans*, the voice in my head kept repeating, *it's just a matter of time before you land on the tenure-track*.

Plunging head-first into the deep end of the service pool, I tried to mirror the professional responsibilities of my tenured faculty mentors: I volunteered for department and university committees; I helped run faculty workshops; I served as a graduate student senator; I even tutored for a short time in the campus writing center, pro bono to boot. I finished my coursework, passed my comprehensive exams, and during my fourth and final year on stipend began collecting my dissertation research. Consumed by the day-to-day hysteria of it all, I had little time to worry about my stipend running out. *I'll be able to land one of those adjunct positions*, the Pollyanna in me repeated; *but everyone who goes "part-time" is so overwhelmed*, the Pessimist barked. *Many adjuncts never finish their degrees, and the pay certainly won't cover my student loan payments*. Although some warned me not to take a full-time job before completing the dissertation, I applied for the few I saw advertised, and accepted a Composition Fellowship at Grand Valley State University, a teaching-intensive, research-oriented institution

of roughly 20,000 students. As a fellow, I earned a good wage, had solid benefits, and enjoyed positive working relationships with specialists in my field. All in all, the vitae building kept me afloat professionally as I inched closer to degree. But the question remains, at what price?

I continue to wonder.

Some critics argue that graduate students' eagerness to gain pre-professional experience stalls their intellectual growth. In as much as positions like fellowships are yet another distraction from finishing the dissertation, they sidetrack candidates from degree completion. John Guillory makes just this claim, asserting that the current frenzy for job-placement in English studies has turned graduate education into "a curious sort of on-the-job-training" (4). Adding fuel to the fire, writers in the vein of Cary Nelson's "What Hath English Wrought" conclude that English studies' surplus labor force is akin to the fast food industry's, as more and more overqualified workers become primed for exploitative adjunct positions (Glenn A12; Miller "Let's" 98; Downing, Hurlbert, and Mathieu 1).

I am persuaded by these arguments, and agree that English studies must address the challenges associated with pre-professionalism, degree completion, and labor exploitation more seriously. Certainly my economic and professional insecurities prompted me to pre-professionalize, just as my limited stipend prompted me to consider adjunct work. Still, I feel compelled to make clear that the non-tenure-track position I accepted at Grand Valley strengthened my job prospects and allowed me to garner a reasonable wage well before most of my graduate student colleagues. While Sledd, Guillory, Nelson and others have produced powerful and important critiques of the state of the profession, critique is slow to effect change, and often neglects institution-specific exigencies. As David Downing, Claude Mark Hurlbert, and Paula Mathieu maintain in *Beyond English, Inc.: Curricular Reform in a Global Economy*, "whatever curricular innovations we imagine, we must negotiate our visions within specific institutions and against specific constraints of powerful corporate-management models commanding our educational system" (4).

ONE PROGRAM'S SOLUTION: SITUATED LEADERSHIP—
OR—A MODEL FOR CRITICAL ADMINISTRATION

In "Student Needs and Strong Composition: The Dialectics of Writing Program Reform," Francis Sullivan et al. argue that WPA work necessitates what they call "situated leadership," a concept which reinterprets the ethic of service and helps theorize active ways of applying institutional critique.

They call on administrators to use their critical skills as rhetoricians as they negotiate institutional life. As the writers assert:

it is only within the social location we have inherited (and which we continue to choose) that we can do the work of fashioning professional practices and reflecting on them, the work of situated leadership. [. . .] Composition's claim to disciplinary is based on something more than our willingness to be of use: it is expressed most fully in the intellectual work of critical analysis, including the analysis of the university as hierarchical and exclusionary, and of the discourses of the university—including our own—as rhetorical exercises of power. (Sullivan et al. 387)

Writing program administrators at Grand Valley practiced a similar kind of situated leadership.

Located just outside of Grand Rapids—a politically conservative, predominantly Protestant pocket of west Michigan—Grand Valley State University (GVSU) boasts huge growth, expanding from 8,000 to roughly 20,000 undergraduates in its forty-plus year history. During my time there, the university administration had close ties to local families who run multi-billion dollar enterprises, including Meijer Corporation, Amway, the Prince Group, and the now infamous (and subsequently rebranded) private defense contractor, Blackwater Worldwide. Wealthy benefactors associated with these corporations contribute substantially to the development of the university, most notably in the form of multi-million dollar donations toward state-of-the-art business and health sciences complexes: both of these high-rises are centerpieces in downtown Grand Rapids' ever-expanding and increasingly gentrified cityscape. While GVSU's professoriate remains a politically diverse lot, the faculty is not unionized, and the local community by and large upholds the conservative, entrepreneurial values of university contributors.² While the institution has made progress in recent years to distinguish between its entrepreneurial partnerships and educational agendas, it is fair to say that corporate influence was particularly acute while I taught at the university.³

Even within this socially conservative, corporate-friendly environment, however, the Department of Writing managed to fund two different kinds of full-time, non-tenure-track positions, positions which *garnered better wages and benefits for non-tenure-track faculty*. The real improvements in work life for composition instructors are not to be underestimated. The Composition Fellowship I held offers ABDs,⁴ MFAs and newly minted PhDs good pay and benefits (about 80% of what junior faculty on the ten-

ure-track earn), financial support for conference participation, and other standard tenure-track perks, including office space, a computer, and supply and copy privileges. While as a fellow I taught the same course load as ladder faculty, I had no formal committee or service obligations, and WPAs restricted my teaching assignments to two days per week. On the remaining days, I had at least some time to devote to scholarly projects other than teaching: completing the dissertation, publishing, preparing for job searches, and so on.

Perhaps even more significantly, during the era it instituted the Composition Fellowship, the department also converted most of its adjunct lines into full-time Affiliate Faculty positions. Staffed by highly qualified local professionals, Affiliate Faculty earn an annual salary only a few hundred dollars less than Composition Fellows, have slightly better benefits, and are not limited to a single three-year contract⁵: in fact, given good performance, Affiliate Faculty can be renewed indefinitely. All in all, both positions result in a better quality of work life for the vast majority of composition instructors at the university, modeling the kind of “prorated compensation” Bill Hendricks recognizes as ideal in “Teaching Work: Academic Labor and Social Class” (614). As an anonymous reviewer of my essay wisely commented, while both positions offer substantially better employment packages than traditional adjunct work, they tender decidedly different perks: while Composition Fellows enjoy a better job title and thus more professional status, Affiliate Faculty enjoy stronger benefits and job security.

As I came to understand, both of these non-tenure track positions also helped maintain a stronger faculty for the newly formed Department of Writing, which separated from English the year I joined the department. Although full-time, non-tenure-trackers had previously been integrated into English, that department relied on a pool of instructors whose teaching preferences were literary. Hiring literature enthusiasts led to staffing concerns, because like many of their ladder faculty colleagues, they preferred not to teach composition. As a result, during the 1990s, almost 90% of Grand Valley’s writing courses were staffed by part-timers. As GVSU writing program administrator and inaugural chair of the Department of Writing, Roger Gilles reported, “something needed to be done.” By performing both local and national searches and seeking candidates who had interest and experience in writing instruction, the Department of Writing helped decrease the number of composition sections taught by adjuncts by upwards of 60%. Factors such as these helped to create a more professional climate for writing instructors at the university.

A COMMITMENT TO WRITING AND THE DISCOURSE ON ACADEMIC LABOR

Through their commitment to the teaching of writing as a legitimate academic pursuit—a commitment that necessitated creating quality working conditions for all writing instructors—Grand Valley’s WPAs were able to attract and maintain a stable, experienced, and well-credentialed staff of composition faculty, committed pedagogues eager to engage in innovative practices such as directed self-placement, multi-grader portfolio assessment, and the development of an undergraduate writing major. As Grand Valley’s Dan Royer and Roger Gilles describe in their contribution to *Field of Dreams: Independent Writing Programs and the Future of Composition Studies*, a department with a commitment to writing studies helps foster a university culture that sees first-year composition as a central part of its mission, rather than an urban “ghetto” connected to—but utterly different from—the “thriving suburban literary landscape” (28). When writing specialists are valued on a campus for their contributions to “general-education and majors courses, both lower and upper-division” (29), the university begins to see writing “within the context of the liberal arts most generally—rather than as a ‘basic skill’ relegated to preliberal education” (36). Through their commitment to writing studies broadly defined, Gilles, Royer and other department members helped reshape campus perceptions about the value of writing instruction on all levels and—in turn—successfully lobbied for an increase in the number of full-time instructional lines needed to support composition.⁶ Working within a tradition of pragmatic reform reminiscent of Harris, as well Richard Miller in *As If Learning Mattered*, Michael Murphy in “New Faculty for a New University,” and James Porter et al. in “Institutional Critique,” WPAs at Grand Valley were able to persuade the campus community that more full-time non-tenure-track positions would help—rather than hurt—the university community.

Of course, the most common criticism against the proliferation of the instructorate comes from a concern for the diminishing number of ladder faculty lines in universities across the nation. This concern was also raised by ladder faculty at Grand Valley. As the logic goes, if universities consistently staff courses with non-tenure-track faculty, what’s to stop the downsizing of the professoriate? I find this logic persuasive to the extent that it decries a real loss of academic job security and seeks to expand the number of tenure-track positions in composition. Nonetheless, a crucial distinction such arguments often ignore is the legion of composition instructors *who have always and who already* teach without job security. These are the overworked “adjuncts” who, depending on whose figures you quote, make up between 40% and 60% of the academic labor force in general. The number

of adjuncts who teach composition in particular, of course, is likely much higher. So, like Cheryl Glenn, I decry the McJobbing of the university—that is—I decry the “managerial decision to employ part-time workers who often enjoy neither job security nor fringe benefits” (A13). But one might argue that a preoccupation with tenure lines is also a form of McJobbing, at least to the extent that it subordinates the interests of the many to the advantage of the few. When ladder faculty ignore their non-tenure-track colleagues by single-mindedly campaigning for tenure-track positions, exploitation ensues.

Still, one might ask, why not work for change in a more time-honored way? Rather than relying on reform from within, why not turn to organized labor to help improve working conditions? Marc Bousquet makes this point in his essay “Composition as Management Science: Toward a University Without a WPA.” By relying on pragmatic rhetoric rather than on the labor movement, Bousquet suggests, WPAs reveal their complicity with corporatism. As Bousquet writes, “current trends in [composition] discourse away from critical theory and toward institutionally focused pragmatism, toward acceptance of market logic, and toward increasing collaboration with a vocational and technical model of education” coincide with “the historical reemergence” of “laissez-faire ideology” (495–96). While I find Bousquet’s conflation of composition studies with market logic and vocational education more than problematic, his work compellingly reveals how WPA scholarship has traditionally ignored the academic labor movement. To this end, Bousquet denounces Harris, Miller, Murphy and Porter et al.⁷, noting that while their work is most often a “genuine attempt to explore a level of institutional critique,” they fail to imagine an academy free of the tyranny of management (518). In contrast to Bousquet, however, I am not convinced that the goals of academic labor and pragmatic administrative rhetoric are at odds.

As most union leaders would tell you, compromise is at the heart of collective bargaining strategy—the trick is using the right kind of language to get both parties to talk and listen. To suggest that pragmatism is contrary to collective organization is to distort the central place pragmatic rhetoric holds in the contemporary labor movement. As the Midwest Academy’s *Organizing for Social Change* maintains, getting the “other side” to the bargaining table implies a considerable degree of open-handed acumen. Negotiation is careful business: worker-advocates can neither agree to compromise too readily nor “automatically assume that every offer is some kind of trick” (29). Bargaining is by definition a give-and-take that works toward compromise. My experiences as a non-tenure-track worker, a writing program administrator, and a member of a tenure-track labor union suggest

that WPAs are far from co-opted cogs in the corporate university. Quite the contrary, it has been the writing program administrators on the campuses where I've worked who have most openly voiced their concerns about worker exploitation: these are the WPAs who successfully garner better contracts for non-tenure-track instructors; the WPAs who take professional risks to decrease graduate students' teaching loads; the WPAs who openly challenge the exploitation of ABD labor.

While not all of these gestures are equally risky or groundbreaking, and while not all WPAs gesticulate in the same ways, such actions help to illustrate that many writing program administrators work in concert with academic labor unions. While it is important to concede, as Bousquet points out, that the rise of rhetoric and composition is in part connected to the rise of non-tenure track workers in the academy, his argument rings hollow when it does not acknowledge the empowering potential WPAs have to support progressive labor reform in their programs, departments, universities, and unions. As most seasoned WPAs will tell you, uncompromising critics often interpret administrative negotiation as selling out. Such attitudes are a painful reality of our work. Although some equate all forms of administration with a dance with the devil—and of course there's an undeniably romantic appeal to such an equation and dismissal—most people involved with the labor movement understand that negotiation is at the heart of collective struggle. As we move toward better working conditions for composition instructors, we must continue to negotiate with the corporate university. For non-tenure track workers like me, such negotiation provided a vehicle to traverse the space between graduate school and the professoriate, a pony I rode while reaching for the brass ring.

Indeed, for most Composition Fellows I worked with at Grand Valley, our full-time, non-tenure-track position was a stepping-stone, a job we took on the way to something else. But it's worth pointing out that while the fellowship provided me an alternative to the adjunct conditions many ABDs face, such positions only stave off exploitation for a limited population, and only for a limited time. In sum, such positions are a Band-Aid for a disciplinary malignancy.

Perhaps the biggest professional compensation I received at Grand Valley, then, was not the solid wages and scholarly status I earned as a Composition Fellow, but the administrative imagination to envision better working conditions for *all* writing instructors, but particularly adjunct workers. Because of the time I've spent in a department that fosters equitable working conditions, I have recognized the power of administrative agency, and the empowering potential of WPA work. In my current role as Director of Composition, I actively champion the cause of non-tenure track writing

instructors, enthusiastically support campus labor unions, and earnestly negotiate with university administrators. And we're working together to realize alternative labor possibilities.

NOTES

1. See Maxine Hairston's "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing," John Trimbur and others' "Responses" to it, and Hairston's "Reply."

2. I grew up just thirty miles from GVSU, and thus my perspective of west Michigan is grounded in a relationship to the community that extends beyond my work in the university.

3. For example, shortly after then GVSU President and MBA-holding Mark Murray took office, while the faculty senate voted to support same-sex partner benefits, the Board of Trustees overruled this decision. As a statement by the GVSU Board read, "it is not in the best interest of the university to add this benefit at Grand Valley" (para. 4). At the time, the university administration argued it had a responsibility to respect the local community's values, and many of us who worked in and grew up in that community understood references to values and interests as code for beliefs held by the socially conservative local business families who supported the university. In 2007, however, Murray left the presidency to take over the Fortune-500 Meijer Corporation, and the new administration has since instated benefits for all household partners, regardless of sexual orientation. As my former colleagues have more recently commented, the corporate influence at GVSU is less overbearing now that Murray has left the presidency.

4. Referring to PhD candidates who have finished their coursework and exams, ABD stands for "all but the dissertation."

5. After I left GVSU, in order to reflect its temporary status, the title of the "Composition Fellow" position was changed to "Visiting Assistant Professor." That said, the position description and compensation rates remain consistent, as do the terms of the Affiliate Faculty position.

6. While my focus here has necessarily been on Grand Valley's creation of full-time positions for writing instructors who traditionally work off the tenure-track, I also wish to note that the Department of Writing has successfully increased its tenure-track faculty: as of spring 2009, there are thirteen ladder faculty in total.

7. In his 2008 monograph, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*, Bousquet republishes "Composition as Management Science" and revises his tone—at least in reference to Porter et al. Therein, he concedes that at the very least, he shares "common cause" with the authors of "Institutional Critique" (160). His criticism of Harris, Miller, Murphy, and others, however, remains intact.

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