

## Professional Identity in a Contingent-Labor Profession: Expertise, Autonomy, Community in Composition Teaching

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper argues that the challenges to professional identity implicit in contingent employment are significantly complicated by the substance and structure of composition teaching as a profession. Drawing on the literature from a range of fields, I explore three factors that have historically defined professions: (1) a specialized and dynamic knowledge base or body of expertise; (2) a distinctive array of rights and privileges accorded to members, and (3) an internal social structure based on shared goals and values. These factors provide a framework for understanding the often disabling tensions inherent in our program cultures, where composition instructors frequently find themselves at odds with the profession they work in. This analysis ultimately yields an instructive model of the composition professional, which I propose as a basis for articulating our professional values as we continue to advocate for improving the material conditions of employment.*

*I'm not sure I understand who qualifies as 'the composition profession.' As a full time but NTT [non-tenure-track] faculty member, does that include me?*

This comment—from a university faculty member who had been teaching composition for five years or more—was prompted by the survey question, “In your experience, what primary topics or issues does the composition profession seem to be interested in?”<sup>1</sup> Imagine asking this question of a chemist or attorney or physician or indeed of a teacher in any other field. Consider how odd it would be if the dentist you’d been seeing for the past five years told you she’s really not sure if she’s a dentist or not. Yet, this seems a perfectly valid response for a writing instructor.

We are well aware of the factors that would make it natural for non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty to wonder if they are truly members of the academic community. Despite the best efforts of WPAs and department heads, the material conditions of NTT teaching—from low pay, short-term contracts and shared offices to the lack of recognition from tenure-track “colleagues” passing in the hall—clearly create the impression that NTT faculty are not members of the professional communities in which they work.<sup>2</sup> This impression is no doubt deepened by our continuing pursuit of a disciplinary identity for writing studies and the corresponding emphasis on advanced degrees in the field, credentials that most composition instructors do not share. For we know that the majority of faculty teaching FYC are not “underemployed” PhDs waiting for the market to change but individuals who graduated from master’s programs with the goal of teaching undergraduates. The CCCC’s 2008 survey of programs indicates that roughly two-thirds of writing instructors hold degrees other than the PhD (Gere), and these degrees are typically in fields other than rhetoric and composition. Thus, though many FYC faculty have made long-term commitments to the teaching of writing, most are not members of the established profession as represented in our disciplinary discussions, a fact that has not escaped the author of my epigraph and an irony that has been frequently observed.

It is worth exploring how a profession so constituted maintains itself as a coherent community, as well as how its members define themselves as professionals. The concept of professional identity is particularly intriguing in our field, where staffing practices intersect with disciplinary indeterminacy to create a teaching community comprising professionals with widely varying preparation, knowledge, philosophical commitments, and disciplinary allegiances. Given the rapid rate of change in the professional knowledge base over the past forty years and the wide range of curricular goals embraced by the field (see, for example, Connors; Fulkerson; MacDonald; Selfe; Hesse), the staff of a composition program may include faculty with allegiances to critical pedagogy and cultural critique, literature-based composition, rhetorical models focused on generic skills, rhetorical models focused on discourse communities, service learning models, ethnography models, multimodal composing, and many others. These categories are not mutually exclusive and rarely appear in “pure” form, but they do represent distinct curricular goals and values, and only some combinations can comfortably co-exist in practice.

But of course “in practice” is where NTT faculty work—to a degree strikingly different from tenure-line faculty as a group. The diversity of perspectives that we value in theory and entertain in our disciplinary scholar-

ship becomes complicated in the applied contexts of FYC programs, where contingent faculty are often hired to further others' agendas rather than their own. Can faculty see themselves as professionals if they must adhere to curricular goals defined by others? Does an instructor who formed her professional identity during the "belles-tristic prose" age, but who now finds herself teaching a curriculum focused on cultural critique, feel a sense of shared values and expertise? What professional community does she belong to? What does "professional" mean when one has neither the signifying position nor the signifying credential of the profession?

In what follows, I first examine the significance of professional identity and then look to the research base on this topic for insight into how identities are constituted. From this scholarship I extract three defining dimensions—expertise, autonomy, community—which I use as a framework for understanding the often disabling tensions inherent in our program cultures, where composition instructors frequently find themselves at odds with the profession they work in. This framework ultimately yields an instructive model of the composition professional, which I will propose as a basis for articulating our values as a professional community.

#### THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

In the context of low salaries and high workload, a faculty member's sense of professional identity may seem a frivolous concern. Membership in a professional community may be desirable, but a livable wage would certainly seem to matter more. But educational history suggests that the significance of this construct goes beyond matters of self-respect and job satisfaction. Research on professional identity among K-12 educators demonstrates a relationship between coherent professional communities and the quality of student learning. In a five-year study of 25 middle and high school English programs, for example, Langer found that teachers in schools with the highest levels of student achievement belonged to strong and varied professional networks that supported their professional knowledge and interests, provided feedback from varied perspectives, and instilled a sense of community (416). In striking contrast, professional communities were "virtually absent" from the "typical" or lower-achieving schools in this study (421), where researchers saw little collaboration or sharing of ideas and where teachers seemed unaware of how their own ineffective practices compared with those of other teachers or approaches. The most successful schools in Langer's study were characterized by a "pervading sense of professional identity":

Teachers in the effective programs are proud to be educators; they think of themselves as professionals and carry their professional selves with them wherever they go. They are in touch with the larger world and the concerns of others with regard to education. They consider themselves spokespersons for the profession. (Langer 426)

This image of the teacher as member of a professional community also contrasts markedly with the image of educators as autonomous agents in the classroom. A pronounced stage in the recent history of education, what Hargreaves calls “the age of the autonomous professional” arose in the 1960s as Western societies began to question traditional methods of knowledge transmission and to recognize pedagogy as value-laden—and thus pedagogical techniques as ideological decisions (Hargreaves 159). Such questioning of existing practice necessitated strong protections for teacher autonomy and individual decision-making. As a consequence, though this period coincided with the development of education as a graduate profession and an increasing recognition of the value of continuing professional development, innovative approaches tended to be individualized and rarely enjoyed widespread implementation. Hargreaves argues that the age of professional autonomy inhibited innovation by isolating individuals from the ideas and practices of others.

By the mid-1980s, this image of teacher professionalism had become largely unsustainable as many teachers found that their insulated personal knowledge and experiences could not adequately prepare them for “the accelerating pace of change” in curricular demands and student needs (Hargreaves and Fullan 51). At the same time, advances in the empirical knowledge base about learning and teaching were challenging the idea that pedagogy was simply a matter of ideology (Hargreaves 163). Hargreaves saw teachers responding to these challenges by drawing on each other’s varied expertise in a collaborative model he characterizes as the “age of the collegial professional” (162), and he sees this collegial network expanding in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to include parents and others outside the school system as integral collaborators and co-learners.

Despite this trend toward collaborative professionalism, however, some teachers still define themselves primarily in terms of their autonomy (Hargreaves 162), and current social pressures toward deprofessionalization of education threaten “to return teaching to an amateur, . . . almost premodern craft, where existing skills and knowledge are passed on practically from expert to novice but where practice can at best only be reproduced, not improved” (168). Langer similarly notes the tradition of “privacy and non-interference” in education (399) as a countervailing factor amidst the development of professional knowledge-building communities. Gerald Graff has

critiqued this tradition of professional isolation in higher education as well, noting that we rarely know what goes on in colleagues' classrooms at the university level, a habit he sees as contributing to the compartmentalization of education and a corresponding lack of coherence in student learning.

The contrast between the image of educator as collaborative community member and that of isolated autonomous individual suggests that professional identities are not simply a matter of assigned status or recognition but self-images that influence behavior—determining, for example, where we seek our professional knowledge and to whom we consider ourselves accountable. But both these images oversimplify; neither provides an adequate representation of the nature of college teaching in general or of composition teaching in particular. A more integrated analysis of professional identity is needed if we are to examine our own situation productively, and a large body of scholarship exists to support such an analysis.

#### DIMENSIONS OF PROFESSIONALISM

Researchers in sociology, education, history, rhetoric, sociolinguistics, and other fields have posited a number of interacting factors constituting membership in a profession. Synthesizing across a range of studies in these literatures, three primary dimensions emerge: professions tend to be defined by (1) a specialized and dynamic knowledge base or body of expertise, (2) a distinctive array of rights and privileges accorded to members, and (3) an internal social structure based on shared goals and values. Discussions of contingent teaching in higher education tend to foreground challenges in the second category, i.e., the withholding of rights and “privileges” such as job security and the accompanying threats to academic freedom; but as the tension between composition's disciplinary and teaching identities illustrates, the three dimensions are closely interrelated.

#### *Professional as Expert*

Historically, professions have been defined most notably by the specialized knowledge or expertise that members possess, knowledge that is valued by the surrounding society and deemed inaccessible to non-members (Edwards and Nicholl 120). The development of the modern professions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been interpreted as a response to the increasing complexity of modern life and also as a reaction against the cultural privileging of wealth in the age of industrialization (Geisler). In contrast to industry, the professions—including teachers, architects, social workers, nurses, dentists, geologists, historians, economists and others—were created not to generate wealth for shareholders but to provide a public good such as health

or knowledge (Geisler 71; see also Siegrist). Members were credentialed on the basis of this expertise, and professional associations developed mechanisms for providing the requisite training and certification. Significantly, expertise is assumed to be dynamic rather than static: true professionals do not simply possess a body of knowledge but engage in continuing professional development and actively contribute to the community's knowledge base (Burn; Day, et al.).

Studying the language of professional economists, sociolinguist Britt-Louise Gunnarsson describes this "cognitive layer" as a professional community's "way of viewing reality" (100). The community's distinctive language or terminology represents a lens through which members "view reality in a professionally relevant way" (100), reminiscent of Burke's terministic screens. From this perspective, a profession's common knowledge base influences what members do or do not notice or attend to in the world around them. This analysis of professional expertise thus highlights not only the basic content knowledge of a profession but, in the language of discourse community theories, the distinctive worldview that members hold (Bizzell).

Under this definition, the expertise of composition teaching is difficult to describe. New composition instructors may find it hard to identify a common worldview that characterizes their profession, given the programmatic diversity noted earlier. As Leverenz has noted, WPAs have "a powerful influence on how others define and teach writing" by virtue of their role in establishing curricula (38). Even programs founded on the WPA Outcomes Statement may espouse worldviews quite different from one another, with some focused on civic engagement and empowerment, others on self-discovery and personal knowledge, others on participation and socialization in the academic community, still others on cultural critique of the academy and other social structures. As a field we place high value on all of these agendas, but our courses usually foreground one of them, and M.A.-holding composition instructors are far more likely to be introduced to the profession through a specific curriculum than through the broader knowledge base in which all of them are grounded. Despite our efforts to introduce GTAs to the breadth of composition studies in comp theory courses, the immediacy and specificity of the teaching experience exert a strong influence on new teachers' perceptions of the field. TA preparation programs associated with divergent curricula naturally convey divergent visions of the field and its values; indeed, Haswell's recent review of sourcebooks for new composition teachers demonstrates little unanimity in the vision of the field projected by five popular collections.

In practical terms, different worldviews lead to concrete differences in course content and methods. Courses with these varied priorities place different values on primary research, secondary sources, and personal experience as forms of evidence, with consequent differences in what research methods are taught and how evidence is presented, documented and relied upon. Our common knowledge of writing development, process pedagogy and student-centered methods will serve us well in any of these curricula, but each of them also requires additional, substantive expertise to teach responsibly. If our claim to teach academic discourse is to be credible, for example, we must develop some knowledge of disciplinary patterns of knowledge-making across the academy. If we aim to engage students in cultural critique or ethnographic inquiry, then we need to have substantive knowledge of the philosophies and methodologies grounding these approaches. To teach a writing studies curriculum, such as that proposed by Downs and Wardle (575), we must know that literature.

These disparate approaches and the various bodies of knowledge they draw upon make up the continually expanding and evolving knowledge base of the composition profession. Though it perhaps poses challenges for those who would define a national credential for writing teachers (Lamos), this curricular diversity is not in and of itself a problem; indeed, it constitutes the richness and responsiveness of our collective work. But when this diversity intersects with our training and hiring practices, fractured and reductive views of the profession may result. That is, while I see the field's knowledge base as varied, evolving, and responsive to context, a contingent faculty member moving from one writing curriculum to another may instead see the goals, and thus the knowledge base, of the profession as haphazard and idiosyncratic. Such a perception may have important implications for the development of professional identity. Faculty who see the profession's knowledge base as idiosyncratic are not likely to see their own knowledge validated. When there is a mismatch between faculty members' own sense of expertise and what the profession seems to value, one or the other may have to give. At the extremes, faculty members may question their identity as professionals and wonder if they belong, or they may question the legitimacy or coherence of the profession and choose not to belong. Even faculty occupying a middle ground—those who have confidence in their own professional knowledge and also respect the program they're working in—may find that the two are not in sync and therefore see themselves as teaching outside their profession. Under any of these scenarios the faculty member is distanced from the professional community and unlikely to see him- or herself as contributing to it, making it difficult to sustain an image of oneself as expert.

*Professional as Autonomous Agent*

As the field's disciplinary struggles illustrate, professional structures imply power relations (Hilferty; Hargreaves and Fullan). The recognition of expertise is intertwined with a second marker of professionalization: the rights and status accorded to members by the broader society. In Gunnarsson's terms, "the cognitive establishment of the field takes place at the same time as the professions fight for their place in society and for the strengthening of their group in relation to other groups" (101). Geisler's history asserts a causal relationship in that professions were granted autonomy on the basis of their specialized knowledge (72). Because professionals had knowledge others didn't, they were granted authority not only to ply their craft but also to develop and maintain their own standards of performance and ethics and to regulate and monitor each other's work. In education, "forms of autonomy and discretionary decision-making ... have been the traditional keystones of teachers' professionalism" (Day et al. 251).

Scholarship on the sociology of professions highlights the socio-economic impact of professionalization, with some viewing the resulting monopolies as "a malevolent force in civil society," exacerbating socioeconomic inequities (Sciulli 917). Current views tend to place this dimension in the context of more positive attributes, such as a profession's "general orientation toward the common good" (Sciulli 921), members' exclusive knowledge, and systems of workplace ethics. Business management researchers Krishnaveni and Anitha, for example, note that because professionals' specialized expertise gives them "influence and power over those for whom they provide service," they are therefore obligated to act ethically (150).

The abrogation of these professionalizing rights and responsibilities is a common theme in discussions of contingent employment in higher education. The AAUP's 2006 Contingent Faculty Index emphasizes the challenge to faculty autonomy implicit in these precarious positions:

Institutions are asking teachers and researchers to commit to them, their mission, and their students without providing an institutional commitment to their faculty employees in return. Carried to its extreme, this paradigm forces all faculty into a situation where the free interplay of teaching and research is constrained, where individuals must focus on the work valued by the institution simply to remain employed. (Curtis and Jacobo 16)

In composition in particular, the applied nature of our work and its organization in multi-section programs bring these issues into sharp relief. Though most FYC programs value and invite participation in the develop-



ment of curriculum and policy, the tenuous status of NTT faculty, and in some cases their limited exposure to the field's knowledge base, mitigate against such participation, even if the work load allowed time for it.

An equally troubling consequence familiar to WPAs is that the concept of professional development can be corrupted under this power structure. Ideally, individual members' ongoing professional development supports continual growth for a field or program, as members keep up with current knowledge in the discipline and share their developing knowledge and expertise. But under the conditions of contingent employment, "professional development" can easily be interpreted as a euphemism for brainwashing or remediation, deepening the skepticism with which such activities are often viewed in university culture. Under this interpretation, professional development activities are intended to regulate and regularize and thus present a clear challenge to an experienced faculty member's autonomy and professional identity.

Educational researchers have described a similar de-professionalizing effect among teachers charged with implementing externally imposed mandates in a variety of institutional contexts (e.g., see Leathwood on further education colleges in the UK; Vahasantanen and Etelapelto on vocational education in Finland; Lasky on secondary schools in Canada; Langer on secondary schools in the US). Teachers interviewed by Lasky, for example, experienced "increased guilt, frustration, and inefficacious vulnerability because they saw themselves being less effective as teachers" when implementing curricular and assessment practices that conflicted with their "beliefs about how to teach, what should be taught, and how student knowledge should be assessed" (911-12). The position of contingent faculty in composition programs is clearly analogous. It's no wonder that professional development "opportunities" may be perceived as coercive rather than supportive under these circumstances. Even as academic professions seek to protect their autonomy in the face of shrinking university budgets, increasing public oversight, corporate sponsorship and other influences, the mechanisms of professionalization *within* the field of composition may be interpreted as an attempt by some members to restrict the autonomy of other members. In this representation, the "malevolent force" of the profession resides not in its influence over non-members but its power over those within. The community's professional right to self-determination is seen as a hegemonic exercise.

### *Professional as Community Member*

Implicit in the above discussions, a third defining element is a profession's internal social structure and cohesiveness, including its attitudes, norms, and group identity as distinguished from other groups (e.g., Gunnarsson 100-01). Geisler reports that some social commentators felt the professions were able to maintain their focus on the public good in part because they consisted of small, collegial, social units where such common purpose could be reached and sustained (71). Sociologist David Sciulli sees the "presence of a collegial form of organization, and thus evidence of ongoing deliberation," as unique to professions, contrasted with the bureaucratic, democratic, or patron-client forms of organization in other social units (937). In Sciulli's analysis, this ongoing interchange among members is essential to a profession, for to fulfill their societal responsibilities professionals "have no alternative other than to ceaselessly scan their environments for any changes in their knowledge base or in client needs that bear on the positional interests of anyone in their entrenched position of power" (936). These collegial relationships are thus integral to the development of expertise and the maintenance of professional credibility.

Cohesiveness and collegiality figure prominently in the research on professional identity in the field of education. As noted earlier, the professional teacher networks in Langer's study provided not only knowledge but feedback and support. Studying teacher mentors, Burn highlights the importance of "an identity which depends not merely on *existing* knowledge, but on the capacity to generate *new* professional knowledge; an identity which includes a role as learner, not merely one as an 'expert' teacher" (460). The "learner" role is a participatory role, implying an interactive social network as opposed to a loose collection of isolated experts. Both of these elements, continued learning and collegiality, routinely appear as essential components of professionalism in this research base (see, for example, Krishnaveni & Anitha; Day et al.; Beijgaard et al.).

When Thomas Miller wrote in *College English* in 2006 that most English classes are taught by "part-timers and temps who are denied the standing of professionals" (151), he was invoking this third dimension of professionalism. In direct contrast to Sciulli's marker of ongoing deliberation, Miller noted that if these instructors are represented in the pages of *College English*, "they are more likely to appear as objects than as agents of deliberation" (151). *College English's* 2011 special issue on contingent faculty suggests some progress toward broader inclusion, though its "specialness" perhaps underscores Miller's point. Several contributors to the *CE* issue call for more recognition of scholarship authored by contingent faculty (Bilia

388; Arnold 423-24), a theme that has also been prominent in discussions of two-year college faculty in particular (Alford). Andelora, for example, attributes the marginalization of two-year college faculty to their “lack of participation in research, theorizing, and knowledge building” (310). Such comments underscore the social nature of professional expertise, the interplay of expertise and community membership as elements of professional identity. That is, it is not simply accumulation of knowledge or even production of scholarship that marks one as a professional but *participation* in the community’s knowledge building and self-definition.

Our national organizations have long emphasized the importance of other forms of professional participation and connection, priorities highlighted in all our national policy statements (NCTE Working Group; McDonald and Schell). Despite their low representation in the profession’s journals, Andelora acknowledges that two-year college faculty have had “considerable success in forming a national presence within the discipline” with the establishment of TYCA, *TETYC*, and increased representation in NCTE, MLA, and CCCC (311-12). Such developments support community cohesiveness at the national level by promoting group identity and creating venues for collegial exchange, both features associated with this third vector of professionalism. At the local level, individual WPAs cultivate this vector by promoting participation in collegial activities such as reading groups, peer workshops, textbook reviews, and curriculum committees (Hassel and Giordano 422; Carpenter 162-63).

As important as these activities may be, however, we know that the practical realities of contingent employment inhibit participation in these critical forms of collegial interchange. Indeed, even basic social connections among local colleagues are difficult to form when faculty teach at odd hours and distribute their time among multiple institutions. The fact that so many contingent faculty nevertheless do make time to serve on committees and attend conferences testifies to their extraordinary personal commitment, not the professional structure of their positions. Bilia points out that because such activities are not part of the job description for contingent faculty in most institutions, these efforts frequently go unacknowledged (388), a pattern also observed by Doe et al. (438). As with the roles of expert and autonomous agent, identity as community member is often frustrated.

In sum, being a professional includes engagement with a distinctive and dynamic knowledge base, meaningful participation in community decision-making, and continuous interchange with others as colleague, mentor, co-learner—all of which require investments of time and energy that few writing instructors can afford.

## CONCLUSIONS: ARTICULATING OUR VALUES AS A PROFESSION

The problems described here are not news to you. Examining them through this historical frame helps us see how the conditions of contingent employment interact with the nature of our discipline and with our program-based organizational structure to undermine our professionalism from within—by cultivating representations of knowledge as static, curriculum as competitive, programmatic coherence as oppression, professional development as indoctrination. How are composition instructors, and composition programs, to maintain coherent professional identities when these traditional sources of professional validation are so disrupted? What are the practical implications of this analysis?

First and most obviously, the role of material conditions in shaping professional identity cannot be overstated. How one views oneself is powerfully influenced by local circumstance, including the physical setting and institutional context and the structural relations these symbolize (see, for example, Jacobe 380-81; Hebb 382-83). We form identities through an ongoing process of interpretation in which our personal knowledge, attitudes, and values interact with the cultural assumptions and expectations implicit in our “workplace landscape” (Reynolds). Teacher educators Coldron and Smith characterize identity formation as “partly given and partly achieved” (711), stating that “[a]n individual teacher’s professional identity ... is, on the one hand, determined biographically, through his or her own choices, and, on the other, socially ‘given’” (714). Thus, though we play an active role in constructing our professional identities, we cannot simply claim this status for ourselves. The time and energy that WPAs, and our professional associations, devote to transforming the landscapes of composition workplaces is effort well placed.

But the concept of professional identity becomes more useful as we move beyond these familiar critiques to envision the new composition landscapes, as Sue Doe and colleagues rightly urge us to do (Doe et al. 446). The present analysis offers a framework for articulating our values as a professional community as we look forward. That is, it helps us think about what we are aiming to achieve besides material improvements in salary and working conditions, as we continue to advocate for improving those conditions.

From the Wyoming Resolution to Doe et al.’s “Discourse of the Firetenders,” the field has called for fair pay, stable contracts, a voice in governance, and other “essential features of [faculty] work, such as the right to grievance and the right to academic freedom” (Doe et al. 445). It is useful to recognize that this set of goals foregrounds the representation of professional as autonomous agent. This is the representation foregrounded in dis-

cussions of the tension between individual and program as well (e.g., Dean 383-84; Bilia 387-88). Angela Bilia's characterization highlights the effect of this tension on professional identity: "you never fully experience accomplishment as a professional when you are constantly treated as an apprentice who needs supervision and direction from those on top" (388). If we define professional *only* as autonomous agent, we cannot resolve this tension. Under this partial definition, individual faculty are either respected as professionals (allowed to teach without oversight) or not (required to undergo professional development and assessment). From this perspective, the solution is obvious: if we want to treat faculty as professionals, we should remove the oversight, thereby restoring autonomy by releasing the individual from the influence of the community.

But if our professional values extend beyond autonomy to include expertise and community, our goals are quite different. The literature reviewed here reminds us that professions are dynamic social groups. Being a professional is not a matter of being free from community decisions but being part of them; not just of acquiring the profession's knowledge but of contributing to it; not of working in isolation but of engaging with colleagues. Clearly we are aiming not for one of these identities—expert, autonomous agent, community member—but for all of them. This understanding of professionalism as active and collaborative is what grounds the best practices in the field, for example, those in which contingent faculty participate in curriculum development (Brunk-Chavez), help design annual evaluation processes (Moneyhun), join reading circles and discussion groups (Hassel and Giordano 422-23), or collaborate on scholarship (Arnold 423-24). Such practices suggest that the kinds of relationships we value as a profession are those in which faculty do not operate as independent contractors but develop expertise and judgment in collaboration with others and apply these talents to common goals. We will measure our progress not just by the rights we secure but by the knowledge-building communities we cultivate.

Understanding professionalism as collaborative provides useful perspective on the question of expertise, for it shifts attention from knowledge as static to knowledge as responsive and evolving. Recent discussion of expertise has centered on whether contingent faculty have it or not, with Nagelhout and Staggers claiming that "the vast majority of contingent faculty members ... do not have the training or the expertise to make large-scale curricular decisions for a writing program" (417) and most other contributors to the *College English* special issue arguing instead that contingent faculty "are credentialed professionals who frequently spend years at the same institution gathering invaluable expertise with students" (Singh-Corcoran and Brady 419). These positions recall the longstanding debate over the

relative value of disciplinary and experiential knowledge (North) but overlook the dynamic and situated nature of both types of knowledge, central to the definition of professionalism advanced here. As Sciulli describes, professionals “ceaselessly scan their environments” (936) to see what new needs there are and what new knowledge is needed. Composition experts are identified not by the possession of a finite body of knowledge but by a rhetorical understanding that motivates them to assess, apply, and adapt their knowledge and develop new expertise as needed to meet teaching challenges in varied contexts. The current effort to establish a disciplinary identity for writing studies is important, I would argue, not because it aims to specify a static body of content knowledge but because it seeks to communicate the basic principles that ground our work—specifically, the principle that writing is substantive and situated (Downs and Wardle); for it is this understanding of writing that motivates the ceaseless scan for new professional knowledge in the field.

Though most WPAs take this collaborative vision of professionalism for granted, I would argue that many new teachers do not, due in part to a necessary preoccupation with the work of the classroom and the narrower professional image reflected in that immediate context, and also due to the inherently individualistic culture of academia. Embracing a culture of professionalism in our field will require changed perceptions as well as circumstances. It is important, for example, to help TAs understand their TA experience as a beginning rather than an end point, especially at the master’s level where the majority of composition faculty are prepared. Explicitly discussing the nature of professional activity in our teaching practica may help graduate students to notice the collaborative knowledge-building and decision-making going on around them and to recognize these behaviors as the essence of professional life.

One practical occasion for such a discussion is in talking with master’s-level TAs about entering the job market. For example, we can use this definitional frame to examine posted positions and help TAs formulate CVs and application letters:

1. What kinds of expertise does the position require? How do this program’s curricular goals resemble and differ from those of courses you’ve taught before? What kinds of pertinent expertise do you have to contribute? What else will you need to teach well in the new program, and how will you expand your knowledge and skills in those directions?

2. What experience do you have as an autonomous decision-maker in a professional context? What kinds of planning have you done, decisions have you made, judgments have you been responsible for? How have you helped shape our curriculum? How have you made our curriculum your own?
3. How are you participating as a member of the composition community? How have you been involved locally, e.g., via workshops and staff meetings, consultations with colleagues, informal planning groups? How have you been involved with the broader profession, e.g., via journals, online forums, conferences, research projects, professional memberships?

Such an analysis helps TAs recognize the range of skills they are developing even as it prompts them to think beyond their individual credentials to their role in the profession.

This model provides an apt professional vision for composition faculty as well, more robust than the teaching-research-service model by which our institutions define us. Under the standard categories of faculty responsibility, the majority of composition faculty are implicitly defined by what they are *not* expected to do (research, service)—by the ways in which they are not expected to contribute. Instead, the current analysis offers a basis for describing what a composition professional does, whether his or her position includes extensive research responsibilities or none. This analysis of professional identity yields an image of professionals as experts developing knowledge and exercising judgment in a communal enterprise. From this perspective, our organization in programs is at the core of our identity as a profession, for it's our interaction with those colleagues and our contribution to those communal goals that define us individually as composition specialists. To fully understand composition teaching as a profession, it will be essential, then, to replace our partial and individualistic models with a more historically grounded understanding of professional as collaborative and contributing. As we continue to work toward material conditions that will enable all composition faculty to so engage, this image may help us understand what we're aiming for.

## NOTES

1. The survey study is reported separately (in preparation).
2. It is well documented that roughly two-thirds of college and university faculty are in full- or part-time positions off the tenure track (Curtis and Jacobe 5; JBL 2). When graduate assistants are included in the mix, full-time tenured or

tenure-track faculty represent only 24.4% of instructional staff in higher education (AAUP 7). The most recent MLA/ADE statistical portrait indicates that 60% of English faculty in four-year institutions and 80% in two-year colleges were in non-tenure-track positions in 2003-04 (Laurence 2, 15). A 2008 survey of CCCC membership (Gere) showed that approximately 58% of writing class sections in the responding institutions were taught by contingent faculty. The nature and implications of these employment patterns have been well examined (Bousquet; Harris; Horner; Schell; Schell and Stock; Worthen).

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