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CONTENTS

Editors' Introduction: Shaping Academic Futures, <i>Bruce Kovanen and Sue Doe</i>	1
Exploring the Impact of Online Education on Labor Practices in Higher Education, <i>Ann Marie Francis</i>	3
Staffing the Writing Circle: Inclusive Staff and Faculty Writing Circles as Sites of Resistance within the Neoliberal Academy, <i>Christine Sharp, Beatriz Ramirez, and Nicole Kenley</i>	14
Contingency and Care: Reimagining Graduate Student Labor Through Writing Center Work, <i>Sarah Ceja, Beatriz Ramirez, and Christine Sharp</i>	44
AI and Graduate Teaching Labor: Reshaping Workload, Autonomy, and Institutional Power, <i>Suman Dey</i>	66
An Issue of Citational Politics: Elevating the Academic Labor in Community-Engaged Projects, <i>Maria Novotny</i>	82
The Impact of USAID Program Suspension on Stakeholders: The Case of Egypt, <i>Ghada Al-Akhdar, Laila ElSerty, Aliaa N. Hamad, and Joseph Robertshaw</i>	109
Organizing in East Texas: Graduate Student Unionizing in an Anti-Union State, <i>Brian McShane and Rachel McShane</i>	131
Union Vibes, <i>Jack Christian</i>	146
Adjunkt: A Play with No Acts, <i>Joel Smith</i>	157



Editors' Introduction: Shaping Academic Futures

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Sue Doe teaches courses in Composition, Autoethnographic Theory and Method, Reading and Writing Connections, Research Methods, and GTA preparation for writing instruction. She does research in three distinct areas—academic labor and the faculty career, writing across the curriculum, and student-veteran transition in the post-9/11 era. Coauthor of the faculty development book *Concepts and Choices: Meeting the Challenges in Higher Education*, she has published articles in *College English*, *The WAC Journal*, *Reflections*, and *Writing Program Administration* (among others) as well as in several book-length collections. Her collection on student-veterans in the Composition classroom, *Generation Vet: Composition, Veterans, and the Post-911 University*, co-edited with Professor Lisa Langstraat, was published by Utah State Press (an imprint of the University Press of Colorado) in 2014.

This issue of *Academic Labor: Research & Artistry* considers the future(s) of academic labor and the shifting working conditions in which we find ourselves. From union efforts in Texas to the effects of USAID cancelation on higher education in Egypt, the scholarship collected in this issue considers questions like, who are universities for? What can we do to make universities more equitable, humane, diverse, and inclusive—to reduce their harms? This issue argues that there are many beginnings which lie in wait, and we can plant the seeds of new futures now, futures based on compassion, care, and justice rather than greed, self-interest, and exploitation. We hope this issue offers paths forward for research, reflection, and action.

We begin this issue with the impact of online education on faculty working conditions. **Ann Marie Francis** outlines the increasing demands for online course offerings in the wake of COVID-19, noting that despite a return to face-to-face instruction, online course enrollment has continued to grow. With such growth—and with research suggesting that online instruction

is more time-consuming—Francis offers a course release as a model of administrative support for online instruction.

The following collection of articles addresses contingent faculty, graduate workers, and the role of third spaces to disrupt so-called “standard” notions of academic productivity and labor. **Christine Sharp, Beatriz Ramirez, and Nicole Kenley** describe their efforts to establish writing circles that foreground connection and community over atomized labor. They posit that a broader “we”—not just faculty or graduate students but staff members as well—can disrupt academic hierarchies and foster spaces of solidarity. **Sarah Ceja, Beatriz Ramirez, and Christine Sharp** continue to explore writing center programming but focus on the emotional, intellectual, and infrastructural labor of graduate writing consultants. They detail a variety of innovative graduate writing consultant initiatives that do important relational work often overlooked by administrative demands for quantified productivity. **Suman Dey** continues this focus on graduate workers—this time examining how AI tools and large language models like ChatGPT are reshaping the working conditions of graduate teaching assistants. Through several interviews, Dey describes how AI leads to expanded workload, increased surveillance, and emotional strain. Dey argues for ethical and humane policies regarding AI use—including the right to decline AI use in classrooms.

Then, **Maria Novotny** asks us to reconsider the value of community-engaged projects and provides myriad ways to argue for shifts in the way we talk about what “counts” and how we value community-engaged scholarship. By surfacing the often-invisible labor of community-engaged projects, Novotny argues for the importance of recognizing such labor in our citational practices as well as our review, tenure, and promotion materials.

These considerations around value continue with an account of the impact of USAID suspension on students, faculty, and staff across Egypt. **Ghada Al-Akhdar, Laila ElSerty, Aliaa N. Hamad, and Joseph Robertshaw** explore the sudden cancellation of USAID on students, faculty, and staff. Their interviews demonstrate the immense disruption to higher education in Egypt as well as how affected stakeholders managed to stand in solidarity with one another.

Two texts then document the struggles of unionizing in Texas, pointing both to affordances and constraints of working within restrictive legal frameworks and the Texas State Employees Union and how different campus cultures may inform how people respond to union activity. **Brian McShane and Rachel McShane** share firsthand accounts of their union activism and offer concrete advice for new organizers, such as “DIY is Your Best Friend” and “Know Your Worth.” **Jack Christian** asks, “Are the arduous steps necessary for robust organizing ultimately worth it in a place like Texas? If so, what might those steps be, and what would make such organizing meaningful when the prospect of collective bargaining remains mostly a pipedream?” Christian considers these questions in light of reporting on his attendance of the 2024 Labor Notes conferences and interviews of union organizers.

We conclude with a script from **Joel Smith**. Taking inspiration from works like Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Eugène Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*, Smith offers an account of late capitalist adjunctification and its attendant absurdities. The story of Odessa and Ulric serve as a mirror to our current working conditions and offers a closing statement to this issue: “let us take comfort in each other.” We are delighted to share Issue 9 with you.

Exploring the Impact of Online Education on Labor Practices in Higher Education



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Abstract

Higher education has seen a sharp increase in the demand for online classes since the pandemic, with little indication that the demand will slow. Students like the flexibility that online classes give them and find that the asynchronous classes often work better for their schedules. As such, colleges are offering more online classes than ever before. While the classes work well for students, many faculty feel the opposite, reporting that online classes are more time consuming than face-to-face classes, especially when teaching a course in the online format for the first time. Faculty note that the time required to teach online classes takes them away from their other professional duties and that they are not always compensated for the extra work that online classes require or that the compensation is not adequate. This paper explores the impact that the increased number of online classes has on faculty and considers how a course release can serve to compensate the faculty teaching the class, benefitting not only the faculty member teaching the class, but also the students taking the class and any faculty who will teach the class in the future.

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Ann Marie Francis is Associate Professor of Composition and Technical Communication at University of North Georgia, where she also serves as Associate Dean for Academic Administration, Cumming Campus. Her work has been published in a variety of journals including *Research in Online Literacy Education*, *Journal of Global Initiatives*, *Writing and Pedagogy*, and *Programmatic Perspectives*, as well as edited collections published by Taylor & Francis and Palgrave Macmillan.

Higher education has been seeing more online course offerings since online education was first introduced, but there has been a stark increase recently, especially since the pandemic. In 2019, 37 percent of college students took at least one course online, a number that was expected to gradually increase over time (Barshay), but when COVID forced educational institutions to close their doors, nearly all classes were moved to an online format, igniting online education. While we have since returned to normal operations in higher education and schools are again offering face-to-face (F2F) classes, the number of students

enrolled in online courses still has not returned to pre-pandemic numbers. In the fall of 2022, 54 percent of college students took at least one class online, with almost half of those students—26 percent of all college students—taking all their courses online (Carlton). The demand for online education is not expected to slow in upcoming years (Venable), and this trend has resulted in considerable research exploring the impact online classes have on the students and their learning experience, including student success in online classes, pedagogical approaches to the online environment, achieving outcomes in online classes, and online student engagement. While there is considerable research on the impact of online learning on students, research that explores the effects of increased online course offerings on the faculty teaching those classes is limited. This paper considers the impact that the increased number of online classes has on faculty and offers an option to support faculty that is often overlooked.

Faculty Concerns About Online Teaching

Although online classes have become more prevalent in post-secondary education, faculty overall still prefer F2F teaching. When Educause Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR) surveyed 13,451 faculty from seven different countries, they found that only 9 percent of those surveyed indicated that they would rather teach fully online classes than teach F2F classes (Pomerantz and Brooks 25). Interestingly, not only did the faculty indicate that they would prefer not to teach fully online classes, but they also stated that they would rather not have most of the components in their F2F classes online (24). Their conclusions are supported by other researchers as well (Young and Bruce; Atwa et al.; Kulikowski et al.), Faculty have many reasons for preferring F2F classes, but the most common stated reasons are the beliefs that online education does not result in the same learning as F2F classes, that teaching online classes demands more from faculty, and that online teaching feels like doing administrative work rather than teaching (McQuiggan; Betts & Heaston; Bolliger & Wasilik; Hartman et al.; Wingo et al.). Specifically, faculty feel that online classes take more work and provide little reward, with up to 90 percent of faculty stating that online classes are more difficult to teach (Hartman et al. 166).

It should be noted, however, that in general, attitudes towards online teaching seem to improve as faculty gain more experience teaching in online environments (Major), and faculty perceptions of online education has improved over time (Johnson et. al). It is unclear, though, if the shift in attitudes is because of a recent appreciation for the benefits of online education, especially since the pandemic, because of a belief that online teaching can provide the same educational outcomes as F2F classes, or because faculty are simply accepting that online classes are not going away. In reality, faculty continue to have concerns about many aspects of teaching online, including the demands that online classes have on their time, the quality of the educational experience for students, the effects online teaching will have on their ability to complete other required work tasks, and the impact it can have on their work-life balance.

Demands on Faculty's Time

The biggest concern that faculty have about teaching online is the time it takes to design and teach online classes, a concern that is warranted according to much of the research. A study conducted by DeGagne and Walters found that while faculty consider online teaching to be a

positive experience, they also felt that it was incredibly time consuming (362). Many faculty argue that designing online asynchronous classes demands more time than traditional F2F classes, noting that what draws students to online education is the flexibility, and what comes with such flexibility is the need for faculty to respond to student questions at all times during the day and on the weekends (Birch & Burnett; Conceição). As such, they feel that online teaching demands more time than a traditional F2F class. Hislop and Ellis differentiate between time and effort, a key distinction (16). Time is easily measured in defined increments or units, while effort is more difficult to measure, and often, Hislop and Ellis argue, faculty's perception of the efforts they put into online classes is often due more to the challenges of learning new technology and the demand to adjust schedules to fit the needs of online students (27-28). Regardless of whether it is defined as time or effort, faculty still believe that teaching online demands more from faculty than teaching a traditional F2F class.

This impression that online teaching takes more time is supported by much of the research. A study by Worley and Tesdell compared time spent teaching technical communication classes online and in person and found that on average faculty teaching the classes online spent 20 percent more time per student than those teaching corresponding face-to-face courses (143). While Worley and Tesdell's study has one of the larger gaps between time spent teaching online classes and teaching F2F classes overall, other research agrees that teaching an online class takes more time than a traditional F2F class (Conceição; DeGagne & Walters). The research makes sense as online classes have additional components that F2F classes typically do not, including video lectures, discussion forums, online exams, and checklists, which faculty must set up, monitor, and often grade. And since for many faculty creating much of the supplemental materials in an online class requires using unfamiliar technology, faculty have to dedicate time to learn technology as they work to get the course set up in the course Learning Management System (LMS) before the semester starts.

In addition to the time spent designing the online class in the LMS, faculty also spend more time teaching online classes due to the extra components of online classes such as discussion threads. Interestingly, the majority of the time faculty spend on discussions is in the background. While faculty do not need to reply to each post, nor should they, they do need to monitor the posts and jump in if the students are unclear or mistaken about the course content or if there are any inappropriate or aggressive posts, which means constantly reading the posts and responding to clarify information, expand on ideas presented, and add to the discussions (Smith 24). Because most online classes are asynchronous, the students are posting discussion responses throughout the day, making it essential for faculty to monitor posts regularly, a fact that makes faculty feel that they must be online at all hours of the day to check and monitor discussion threads. This time commitment is very different from a F2F class, where all discussions take place in the classroom during a set time, with a portion of that time spent on lectures, questions from students, and in-class discussions.

In addition, online classes tend to require faculty to spend more time communicating with students. There are two primary types of communication in online classes. The first is communication from the faculty that is sent to all students in the class, often sent through email and/or LMS announcements. Many faculty send messages using more than one method to help ensure the students see the information, a standard practice in online teaching. The other type

of communication, one-on-one between a student and the faculty member, can take place over email, direct messages, phone calls, or even video calls. A typical online class generates more emails, phone calls, discussion threads, and chatroom questions and answers than F2F classes, with some faculty reporting they receive up to 600 emails from their online sections (Cavanaugh 4), which can leave faculty as though they are essentially on call and expected to be available at all times, a theme that was common in DeGagne and Walters' research on online faculty. Participants in their study indicated that they found it difficult to get away from work in asynchronous online classes since students are constantly sending messages, asking questions, wanting clarification, and needing assistance, with the communication from students not being limited to standard working hours. While no one expects faculty to be on call 24/7 when teaching an online class, the students do need answers to questions when they are working on assignments, which is often outside of standard business hours, leaving faculty to feel like they are constantly working.

Courseware

One direct effect of the increase in online class offerings is the use of courseware. Because of the extra work that online classes demand, or at a minimum that faculty perceive that online classes require, some faculty use courseware to design and organize their online courses. Major publishing companies create courseware to complement their books and facilitate learning; the students in the courses must purchase the courseware to have access to the electronic textbook and accompanying materials. The systems can typically be integrated with the school's LMS and usually include videos, interactive webpages, quizzes, and even assignment prompts. Courseware is becoming increasingly popular as a tool for faculty. According to a survey by the National Association of College Stores (NACS), 31 percent of faculty surveyed indicated that they use courseware or adaptive learning platforms. It is important to note that the faculty surveyed by the NACS included both faculty teaching online and those teaching F2F classes and that some of the faculty are required to use the courseware as part of their departmental requirements. That being said, courseware is obviously becoming popular.

There are, of course, concerns about the use of courseware, one of which is price. The fees for the courseware can be high, sometimes exceeding \$200 for some classes, especially those in STEM (Swaak, "The Homework Tax"), a price that is especially hard to swallow when student access to the electronic textbook and other materials often expires at the end of the semester. The reality is, however, that while professors are aware of the expenses of course materials and want to find lower cost options for their students (NACS), they are also aware of the demands on their time, and they perceive courseware as a way to decrease their time on course preparation and course management, thereby increasing their time available for other responsibilities.

Courseware saves faculty time by doing much of the course design for the faculty and providing supplemental materials that traditionally were created by the professors, including assignment prompts, case studies, exams, and discussion questions. The publishing companies furnish everything needed for the class, and work with all the major LMS platforms to seamlessly integrate the two, allowing students to access the materials that are designed by the publishers directly from the LMS. Course design is one of the most time-consuming aspects

of teaching an online class, especially when faculty are unfamiliar with the technology or how to create multimodal components that are encouraged in online teaching, and publishing companies use courseware to solve this problem and reduce the time required of faculty. They provide an abundance of the course materials, usually considerably more than the faculty need, allowing faculty to decide what to use and what not to use.

In addition to the time savings, faculty often see courseware as a way to provide course material created by professionals and experts in course design. While professors are experts in their subject area, most are not as knowledgeable about course design, so having someone with extensive knowledge about designing a course, incorporating multimodal lessons, and embracing online pedagogy research when designing different components for an online class is an attractive option for many faculty. Courseware is also popular because for many faculty, teaching is the least important aspect of promotion and tenure, an important point since Johnson et al. found that the majority of faculty felt that teaching online classes resulted in lower learning outcomes, which directly affects promotion and tenure (298). Faculty who do not believe that online classes provide the same learning experience as F2F classes often trust that having someone else design the course will result in better outcomes for the students, especially when the people and/or companies producing the course packs are experts in online course design. When coupled with the fact that teaching is often the least impactful consideration for promotion and tenure, it is logical that many would outsource their course design and focus on the areas for promotion that they feel will better benefit them in the long run.

In addition, faculty turn to courseware because of the time it saves. When faculty use a course pack instead of doing all the steps of course design on their own, they can use the time they would spend developing the class, creating course materials, recording video lectures, writing assignment prompts, and even providing feedback to focus on other responsibilities, such as service and scholarship. Not only does courseware save time, but it also usually includes content that incorporates videos, music, animation, and hyperlinked content that faculty often lack the technical knowledge to create but that many consider essential to online course development. And since many faculty don't have extensive training in online course design or the technology to create the media that is provided by the courseware, using content already developed is often preferable. Again, the use of courseware is not limited to online classes. Faculty in F2F classes also use courseware, but when it is used in an asynchronous online class, the faculty are more likely to depend on the courseware to take the place of instructor-created lectures and student-faculty interactions, sometimes even using the courseware to put the class on autopilot and limiting faculty engagement (Swaak, "The Substitute Teacher").

Administration Support for Online Teaching Faculty

As the number of online class offerings increases, the requests from faculty for support also increases, primarily in one of two formats: incentives and training. Most chief online officers report that they provide incentives for faculty teaching online classes, with schools that offer more online classes most likely to provide incentives (Garrett et al. 31). In addition to incentives, the report shows that administration also tries to provide support through training

and teaching and learning centers, with 75 percent of chief online officers reporting that they have at least one teaching and learning center at their institution (34). Of those that have teaching and learning centers, 70 percent of the centers offer assistance with online course design to faculty, although the majority do not require online faculty to utilize the teaching and learning centers when designing their online courses (Garrett et al. 35). From this research, it would appear that faculty would feel that their institutions support those teaching online classes. Unfortunately, the opposite is true: faculty feel that institutional support is declining for those teaching online classes, especially with regards to training and compensation (Johnson et al. 302), a perception that directly affects the faculty's satisfaction when teaching online classes.

Training for Faculty

A major area of disconnect between administration and faculty is training for online classes; administration feels they provide adequate training options for those teaching online classes (Garrett et al. 30), but faculty disagree. Almost half of the faculty surveyed report that the training they receive is inadequate, with faculty perceptions of institutional support trending down over the six-year span studied (Johnson et al. 302). One reason for the disconnect could be related to the type of training required. Online faculty need training not only on the technology used in online classes, but also on how pedagogical approaches differ in online classes compared to F2F classes. Often the training provided for faculty focuses on the administrative side of teaching online classes, such as monitoring attendance and tracking discussion replies but lacks training on online pedagogy and how to better design online classes to meet the specific needs of different disciplines. This approach of focusing on how to use tools in the LMS instead of focusing on the differences in online and F2F classes is problematic and limits faculty's understanding of the online student and their needs, as well as limiting faculty's confidence in their own ability to teach online effectively. McSpadden notes that faculty often are willing to incorporate different types of technology and multimodal activities into their online classes, but they are uncertain if they are incorporating it effectively from a pedagogical standpoint (60). These feelings of uncertainty in online course design are exacerbated if faculty have not been trained on the technology or if they feel the training was not adequate. The problem is often worsened by the fact that a large number of faculty teaching online classes never actually participated in a university-level online class during their time as students, so they have little to no experience as a student in the online educational world.

It is important to note that since the pandemic, training for faculty teaching online classes has increased. Before 2020, 54 percent of institutions offered training for online instructors, but the training was optional. After the pandemic, there was a shift for institutions to require training for online faculty, with the same number, 54 percent, requiring that faculty complete training before teaching online classes (Garrett et al. 26). While that research is encouraging, the study also found that the number of public four-year institutions requiring training for online faculty is decreasing over time, a trend which is concerning as public four-year institutions are increasing their online class offerings and faculty are feeling the strain of feeling unprepared to teach online classes.

Compensation

There is also a disconnect between how administrators and faculty view rewarding faculty for online teaching. The *CHLOE8: Student Demand Moves Higher Ed Toward a Multi-modal Future*, a comprehensive research project that surveyed chief online officers from higher education institutions across the US, explored how institutions provide rewards or incentives for faculty teaching online classes. The administrators outlined the different types of compensation or other incentives provided to faculty teaching online classes: 55 percent listed working remotely as the incentive provided, 33 percent responded that teaching credit was given as an incentive, 18 percent provide faculty with new technology for teaching online, and 11 percent gave faculty a reduced load when teaching online classes (Garrett et al. 32). These findings do not match the findings of Johnson et al. who researched how faculty were rewarded, either through compensation or through course releases for teaching online classes and were unable to find any substantial reward provided to faculty teaching online (304). Their research, which considered faculty perceptions of online teaching, showed “very little evidence in the literature to suggest that rewarding faculty for teaching online has ever been a common institutional practice” (304). Their research additionally found not only that faculty feel the compensation for online teaching is inadequate, but also that those who volunteer to teach online do so only because of personal motivators, such as the ability to work around family demands (Johnson et al. 305). In other words, the faculty who are most likely to offer to teach online classes do so primarily because of the benefits it provides them and their personal situation. For example, those with small children can teach online and avoid childcare costs, providing a benefit that outweighs the challenges that come with online teaching.

Discussion

There is no scenario in which the increased number of online classes does not affect faculty or change labor practices for higher education. Most research supports the idea that online teaching takes more time and energy than F2F teaching, as well as demands more of the faculty. These extra demands on faculty directly affect their ability to complete additional responsibilities, including service and scholarship. Those responsibilities have not changed, even though the demands on faculty time have increased. For this reason, it is imperative that administration show support for those faculty designing and teaching online classes. Faculty are aware of the amount of time and energy that online teaching requires, or at a minimum have a strong perception of the time commitments, especially with online course development, and feel that doing such work can potentially interfere with their other duties, many of which are required for promotion and tenure. As the majority of the time demands are from the original course design and the extra work required the first time teaching the class, colleges and universities should provide compensation for faculty designing online classes or moving a F2F class to the online format.

As noted, there are different types of compensation that can be offered, with one of the least common options being a reduced course load. Although just over ten percent of the chief online officers surveyed indicated that they provide a reduced course load as incentive for designing and teaching online classes (Garrett et al. 31), it is an option that needs to be explored more often and should be offered as a way to compensate faculty for online course design. As

the research shows, developing and teaching online classes takes considerable time, and a course release allows the faculty to dedicate time to ensure the course is pedagogically sound without having that work interfere with their other duties or their progression towards advancement.

When giving a reduced course load, it needs to be clear what the expectations are. If the course release is specifically for course development, it is reasonable to have expected training requirements on online course design and implementation. Faculty should learn about different approaches to online education, what works best for their student body, how to engage students and build community in asynchronous online classes, and what techniques improve online learning in their discipline. If courseware is an option, there should also be clear expectations of how courseware is used within online classes. While courseware can be used to supplement, it is too often used to replace the instructor's expertise by relying on the publishing companies to design the course and then putting the class on autopilot. If a faculty member is getting a course release and they are using courseware, they should use the extra time from the reduced course load to determine how best to use the courseware and how to supplement the materials provided by the publisher with their own content.

One advantage of providing a course release to faculty who design online classes is that the faculty member has more time to complete training on online course design, allowing them to get trained on both general online pedagogy and online course design specific to their discipline. Time constraints often make it difficult for faculty to participate in all the training they would like to, but having a reduced course load frees time and allows the faculty to participate in various types of training. While training on the technical aspects of online classes, like creating videos and taking attendance, is important, faculty also need instruction on course design specific to their discipline, and they need the time to take the training, digest what was covered, and apply it to their classes. A course release provides the time for discipline-specific training and also sends a clear message that administration knows that online pedagogy is not the same as F2F pedagogy, and they want and expect faculty to dedicate the time and energy to make the online classes as effective as possible.

Once faculty have been trained and designed their online class, they have the tools and knowledge to then mentor other faculty who are teaching the same class or even similar classes in subsequent semesters. Universities often have departments dedicated to online education that provide training on LMS and other universal technology, but it is less common to find similar departments that focus on discipline-specific design elements of online classes. This approach would provide benefits extending beyond the initial training. First, because the faculty are teaching the same courses, the guidance would be specific to the discipline, providing the mentee with details of how to design an online course for their specific subject. For example, a writing professor might learn how to implement peer review sessions in an asynchronous online class, while the biology professors would focus on how to handle lab work. Since the two different disciplines require very different teaching approaches, having a mentor within the department who took training specific to the discipline is invaluable. In addition, the approach would increase engagement between faculty by providing an avenue for faculty less experienced with online course design to learn from those who have additional

training. Finally, it would provide a service opportunity for the faculty, something that is essential, especially those going up for tenure and/or promotion.

The opportunity to give a reduced course load for faculty designing and teaching online classes provides benefits that cannot be understated. It starts by sending a clear message that online education is important, so important that the college or university is ready and willing to provide what it takes to ensure the classes are done well. It also provides time for faculty to spend training and researching options to determine what will best work to help students meet the course objectives, which in turn improves student learning. But the benefits extend beyond the immediate faculty member and their students. As the faculty serves as a mentor to others in the department, engagement and community within the department increases. A reduced course load for faculty designing and teaching online classes is an overlooked option to compensate faculty for online design and teaching, and it is one that should be considered more often.

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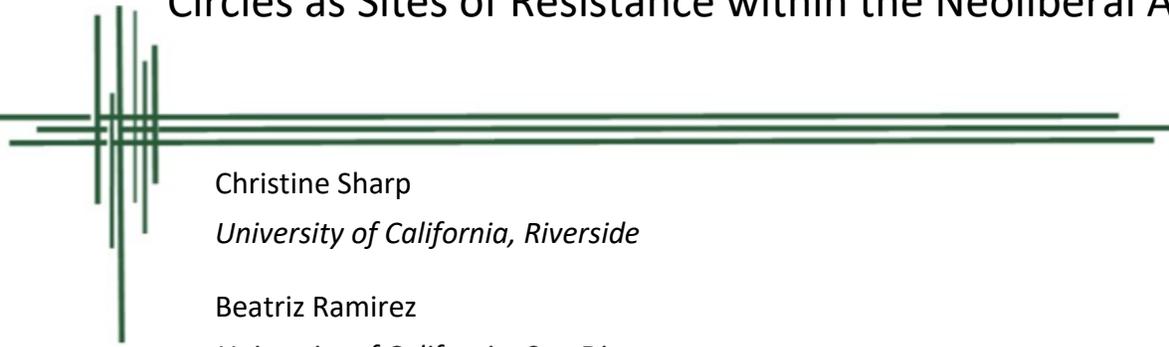
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Staffing the Writing Circle: Inclusive Staff and Faculty Writing Circles as Sites of Resistance within the Neoliberal Academy



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Abstract

In this article, we explore the potential for writing circles that include staff and faculty to serve as sites of resisting the neoliberal university. We discuss the design, contexts, objectives, and outcomes of the inclusive writing circle we founded at our institution, drawing from existing scholarship and qualitative participant data to situate the circle as a complex space capable of both fostering academic productivity and resisting the academy's pressure to produce. Ultimately, we encourage other WPAs to consider how writing circles might be used to re-imagine the academy's neoliberal hierarchies and foster community-as-resistance.

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As the editors and contributors to the recently-published *Faculty Writing Support: Emerging Research from Rhetoric and Composition Studies* remind us, “Faculty writers, particularly those who do not fit the traditional faculty writing model, are struggling and need support” (8). Our article explores an intervention that centered the writing needs of a broad range of educators: for career staff, lecturers, and non-ladder rank faculty, our “writing circle” intervention enabled these educators to communicate in community through lightly structured, regularly scheduled writing sessions.¹ Based on the findings we gathered from our pilot writing circles program, we posit that educator-facing writing circles provide writing centers and writing programs with both a crucial opportunity to remain relevant in the neoliberal academy and a tool with which to resist neoliberalist tendencies that have historically valued production over community, labor over relationship.

Because colleges and universities depend on labor from highly-credentialed experts in both non-ladder rank faculty and career staff positions, they are, theoretically, sites that offer avenues of professionalization for diversely-situated scholars. These avenues include directing specialized campus centers, administrating academic units, and holding teaching-focused positions. Though these positions rely on the kind of expertise and ongoing professional and scholarly development that is fostered through research writing, universities often fail to offer institutional support to forward that requisite research and professional development for professionals outside ladder-rank positions. While many factors, including austerity and the adjunctification of the profession, contribute to a lack of institutional support, one dominant reason for this dynamic may be the presumption that certain fields and positions matter more than others due to the disparate funding streams that emerge through Carnegie research activity designations. Another consideration may be the relative difficulty institutions have in tracking publications by non-ladder-rank faculty since those works may not count towards promotion.

¹ Throughout our piece, we refer to the frequently convoluted terminology surrounding differences between educator ranks. This tangled languaging around academic rank so ensnared us, both in crafting our materials for our writing circle and in drafting this article, that we created a glossary of terms (included here in our appendix). In writing, we were often reminded that, because we navigate a system that functions in large part based on the existence of ranks, it is difficult to find a rhetoric of positionality that can exist outside of that system. One goal of our writing circle is to highlight how arbitrary these distinctions can be as a means of dismantling them.

An additional contributing factor may be the widespread practice of scholars working in university positions that do not formally include research as part of their job loading.

Among other concerns, this lack of institutional support for diversely-positioned researchers can lead to a pervasive devaluation of scholars and scholarship produced outside of the ladder rank. Indeed, as the field of Rhetoric and Writing Studies (RWS) is situated within the neoliberal institution, we as a discipline share responsibility for perpetuating these practices. Previous studies on writing and labor have focused primarily on the ladder rank faculty experience, likely as a consequence both of institutional funding constraints as well as historical discourse patterns that privilege ladder rank faculty experiences over those of our career staff colleagues.² Much scholarship and professional framing from within RWS reflects the complex dynamic of trying to combat systemic inequalities from within the neoliberal institution. The Conference on College Communication and Communication website, for example, offers a position statement on “Working Conditions for Non-Tenure Track Writing Faculty” that recommends “access to professional development and scholarly resources.” However, the specific types of support enumerated—while inclusive of valuable resources for professional development such as funding for travel, eligibility for graduate courses, and opportunities for grant funding without tenured faculty sponsorship—make little reference to supporting non-ladder rank writing faculty scholarship. Further, the CCCC’s position statement on “Scholarship in Rhetoric, Writing, and Composition” states that “traditionally, rhetoric, writing, and composition faculty have held tenured faculty positions” and notes that scholars in institution-wide writing centers and WAC programs are frequently appointed “with a tenure home in an academic department.” Though these tenuring practices would doubtless be appreciated, framing the roles only in terms of tenured positions does not represent the reality of the many writing center directors and writing program administrators (WPA) working in non-tenurable or career staff positions. Similarly, the CWPA’s “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration” statement omits career staff who administer writing programs altogether. Such statements represent the field’s narrow focus on ladder rank faculty experience at the expense of scholars in non-ladder rank faculty and career staff positions.

Thus the pressures of the neoliberal institution obscure opportunities for transformation even within writing studies, allowing the labor-intensive experiences of directing a writing center or writing program, or teaching as non-ladder rank faculty within these contexts, to limit scholarly production from these researchers. At the same time, as Taft et al. argue, because some “writing studies research has argued for the importance of writing support for a variety of faculty and students, including contingent faculty...writing studies may be particularly well equipped to...[provide] the kind of writing support our field has called for” compared to other

² The neoliberal institution supports the production of certain types of scholarship over others: ladder rank faculty scholarship over non-ladder rank, permanent faculty scholarship over contingent faculty scholarship, and faculty scholarship over staff scholarship. As we discuss later in this article, we all navigate neoliberal institutions that attach differentials of value to constructed hierarchical positions, including within our discipline of Rhetoric and Writing Studies.

fields (44). Taft et al. identify an opportunity, then, for writing studies scholars to reconsider whom to include in scholarly writing groups. With these exigencies in mind, our article considers shared writing circles for faculty and staff as a way to engage “the intersections of labor precarity and academic publication, a pivotal location where...identities as professionals and workers intersect,” positioning the labor of professional staff and non-ladder rank faculty as entry points for highlighting unseen and undervalued labor (Lynch-Binieck and Cox 676). By centering the needs of these populations, writing centers and their allies can uplift the writing-related needs of teaching faculty and career staff, thereby disrupting part of the institutional apparatus of the neoliberal university.

Efforts have been made in writing center scholarship to expand on the positionalities and stories of professional writing center staff, non-Senate and non-ladder rank faculty, professional staff, and student tutors (Clark-Oates and Cahill 111–126; Giaimo and Lawson 3–5; Herb and Gardner 1–6; Sabo et al. 54–68. Increasingly, too, emerging scholarship centers examples of faculty writing groups that aim to support ladder rank faculty (Alexander and Shaver 58–86; Atchinson and Guerin 3–17; Cuthbert et al. 137–49; Dwyer et al. 129–144; Haas 78–111; Rifenburg and Johnston 239–254; Taft, Babcock and Vis 43–61.) However, when non-ladder rank faculty or career staff members are referenced in this scholarship, it is often at the margins. If mentioned at all, these scholars may be named as populations that merit attention, but which do not fully materialize as worthy of deeper exploration by the very scholarship that purports to make marginalized experiences of WPAs visible.

Perhaps it is, in part, owing to such oversight—in our own scholarly community and at our institutions—that career staff retain a sense of allegiance to evaluative principles that do not officially apply to their job roles; namely, the irresistible pressure to publish. Many of us maintain a strong commitment to scholarly output despite the impediments that exist in an environment of “unchecked whiteness” that otherwise presume we lack value in our institutions (Micciche and Guy 139). “Publication is political, classed, raced, able-bodied, and gendered” we must remember. “Who gets to publish, the authority they are given once they publish, and all the possible voices that are left out of the scholarly conversation are critical to how our field makes knowledge, retains members, and ultimately works with writers” (Martini 66).³ Ultimately, because “academic workers who do not publish are seen by some TT faculty as second-class professionals...many [academic workers] continue to publish when it is not required [because] the academic machine has convinced some that to abandon research is to embrace a second-class professional identity” (Lynch-Binieck and Cox 679). It seems clear, then, that the omission of professional staff in the broader narrative of scholarly activity and support for writing scholars in our field reinscribe and lend credence to neoliberalist discourse in our institutions. If this is so, how might we embrace this opportunity to advance our

³ While we do not have the space, here, to delve more deeply into the myriad ways social identities - race, gender, ability, class, sexual identity, faith, and the like - impact us as scholars, it is important to acknowledge that interventions such as our own can assist in surfacing how systemic oppression not only exists within our institutions of higher ed but are often perpetuated within and amongst privileged members of the institution - such as faculty - as a means of retaining, reinscribing, and embracing power.

collective resistance by centering the strengths and needs of professional staff at our institutions? As sociologist Allan Johnson reminds us, we all participate in social systems and, as such, can make decisions—and take actions—that either change or perpetuate those social systems (26).⁴ Those of us who serve as WPAs could, perhaps, be more aware of how the pressures that our neoliberalist academic systems exert upon us lead us to perpetuate, albeit unintentionally, the neoliberal logics within our very field.

With these caveats in mind, we hope to build upon the important work undertaken by our colleagues by examining writing communities—or, as we call them, writing circles—as “third spaces” (Oldenberg 21-36) where otherwise marginalized educators can find community and advocate for their contributions to field-specific knowledge as advancing the mission and values of their home institutions. In other words, we consider writing circles as a means of highlighting the intellectual labor of professional staff members and teaching faculty as both worthy of attention and as a vital tool for navigating, or even transforming, neoliberalist institutions of higher education. In naming our spaces as circles, we hope to highlight a non-hierarchical framework for the reconceiving of academic labor. What follows is our preliminary foray into this unexplored terrain in our local writing ecosystem. We have found that writing centers, in collaboration with campus partners such as undergraduate writing programs, can re-center the professional writer’s identity, expand the scope of participation within our services, and foreground writing as a collective experience that transcends institutional hierarchies.

Neoliberal “Situations”

The three co-authors of this article navigate a dynamic ecosystem with our social identities as well as our professional identities serving as compasses that guide our travels. As part of the work that writing centers and writing programs can undertake to resist neoliberalism in the academy, we want to acknowledge our own identities as informing our efforts, here, in our local context. Indeed, acknowledging “[w]riting [as] both a cognitive and an embodied act” through our own self-identification and positionality is an essential first step towards making visible the rhetoric of neoliberalism that haunts even our own field and impacts us all (Monty 41, 42).

Taking the lead from scholars such as Laura R. Micciche and Batsheva Guy who center feminist, Marxist, and critical race theory within their explorations of faculty writing support in historically white institutions (HWI), we want to describe how each of us experiences a complex sense of embodiedness at our institution. It is worth noting that our university has been granted an Asian American Native American and Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI) designation and is currently categorized as an “emerging HSI.” While our institution has achieved the 25 percent threshold for Hispanic/Latino/a-identified student enrollment, our “African-American” student enrollment remains low—currently situated at 3.6

⁴ Writing center studies scholar Randall Monty echoes Johnson when he implores writing center administrators “to recognize how writing centers are culpable in perpetuating myths of [neoliberalism]” as the first step in resisting neoliberalist ways (40).

percent of our total undergraduate student population. Approximately 17 percent of our undergraduate population identifies as “white.” Our “staff” composition parallels that of our undergraduate population: nearly 30 percent of staff identify as “Hispanic/Latino/a” and 4.7 percent identify as “African-American.” Approximately one-third of all staff identify as “white.” In comparison, our faculty (or “academic personnel”) composition hovers around 8.7 percent Hispanic/Latino/a-identified and 2.4 percent “African-American” identified while the majority of “academic personnel”—61 percent, specifically—identify as “white.”⁵ In other words, we continue to navigate historically white spaces at our institution.

Chrissy: I am currently positioned as a career staff, full-time writing center administrator. My doctoral degree in English affords me a modicum of privilege within higher education; however, my identity as a first-generation Latina and the label of “professional staff” has illuminated how higher education is a historically exclusive and hierarchical enterprise. Having a robust scholarship agenda—including publications in my area of specialization (eighteenth-century studies) along with those related to faculty development, writing pedagogy, and learning with AI—has never formally been used to evaluate my performance; however, I have maintained my connection to the professions through regular conference participation and occasional publications. Sustaining the energy needed to undertake these endeavors, however, has been challenging due to the outsized administrative workload I manage and consequent minimal value afforded to my scholarly efforts. What one of my colleagues recently described as the “grunt work” of administrative positions primarily occupies my work day.

Nicole: I am currently situated as an Associate Teaching Professor, which is a tenured, non-ladder rank Senate Faculty position distinct from ladder rank lines at our institution. At other institutions, I have also worked in contingent lines, a non-ladder rank line outside the university’s tenure structure, and a ladder-rank line at a university without a tenure structure. As a white person in academia, I have been invited to hold administrative positions, often over my equally-or -more qualified colleagues of color, especially in Historically White Institutions (HWIs). My current appointment as an Associate Director in one of our eight undergraduate writing programs also means that a substantial portion of my work is administrative. Scholarship is one method for demonstrating a necessary component for my promotion, professional development, but it is not required since research is not part of my academic loading. Teaching and, especially, administrative work occupy the bulk of my time.

Betty: I am currently positioned as a career staff, full-time writing center administrator. I am a first-generation college student with a doctoral degree in comparative literature that gives me some privilege in certain academic and professional circles. My doctoral journey first introduced me to the “publish or perish” demands of the professoriate as writers, researchers, and instructors. Now, as an Associate Director of the Writing Center, I see beyond those publishing demands towards the barriers to meet those demands such as teaching loads, administrative work, and accessibility to resources. I’ve worked towards being an independent

⁵ See: <https://ir.ucsd.edu/stats/undergrad/undergrad-demogr.html> and <https://ir.ucsd.edu/stats/undergrad/undergrad-demogr.html>

scholar that advances her scholarship in writing center studies and literature studies, works administratively at the writing center, and holds an adjunct position at a different university teaching online courses.

In these roles, then, we worked collectively to understand where opportunities existed to advance our writing community. However, our efforts emerged around the same time that budget cuts roiled our flagship state school system. These cuts directly impacted our efforts and necessitated a better understanding of the institutional forces that both created and sustained value systems related to writing and publishing. Consider, for instance, a recent communication to the academic affairs community on our campus that opened with a reference to “our current budgetary situation.”⁶ It was a stunning example of the “neoliberal rhetorics” Nancy Welch expertly surfaced in her CWPA 2018 plenary address and her co-written book *Composition in the Age of Austerity*. Welch identifies that these neoliberal rhetorics “operate...above all through obfuscation” and use “the fuzzy rhetorical games of *la langue de coton*, or woollen rhetoric” to apply market-based decision-making to public education (108). A “situation” distributes and dilutes the sense of responsibility for a socio-economic and socio-political crisis in higher education and, in local contexts, across the entirety of the university populace. “Situation” works as neoliberal rhetorical code for “equality”—rather than, say, “equity”—a business-speak approach to justifying the apparatus through which fiscal (read: political) decisions drive principals of education that should be grounded in field-specific expertise and scholarship. A “situation,” too, represents the kind of “rhetoric that trains us to see problems and their solutions in free market terms” and which serves the neoliberalist ends of institutions of higher education (Welch 105). And, as Welch reminds us, we must “[f]irst, understand that the scarcities we’re facing are manufactured” and furthermore serve as symptoms of decision-making that has been grounded in market logic dating back to, at least, the 1970s (107).

While the neoliberalization of higher education in the United States is a topic that has been heavily canvassed in our field, a working definition for this phenomenon can be useful for contextualizing our local efforts to resist the dominant force that shapes our institutions.⁷ The “managed university,” with its hallmarks of “‘marketisation, competitiveness, and standardisation’ (Gaiamo and Lawson 9; 87)” - has emerged as a direct result of broader neoliberalist forces (Rifenburg and Johnston 251, following Mulya). When universities are managed through “neoliberal logics” as if they were private corporations, the following trends

⁶ *Academic Affairs Newsletter*. May 1st, 2025. University newsletter, unpublished manuscript.

⁷ As Nancy Welch has convincingly - and repeatedly - argued, the broader socio-political forces of neoliberalism play an outsized role in shaping institutions of higher education. Broadly speaking, “Neoliberalism is what has largely emerged as a global consensus that recurring crises in capital accumulation can be solved and corporate profitability restored through labor casualization, deregulation, reducing or eliminating social supports, and privatizing formerly public institutions and resources, including education, so as to reduce the cost of doing business and create new markets for doing business” (104). Given this dynamic, it is no wonder that societal changes are inextricably linked to upheavals in higher education: “Neoliberalization is a way to describe the changes we are seeing in higher education that have had their analogues in virtually every sector of society [materializing as] a change toward privatization and the economization of public services” (Welch & Scott 7).

materialize: an increase in managerial authority and concurrent decline in “academic professional autonomy”; the application of free market reasoning, with a particular emphasis upon “return on investment” thinking, to institution-wide decision-making; a students-as-customers mindset; a reframing of academic research as mere entrepreneurial effort to secure external grants; and an emphasis upon quantitative rationales, rather than “qualitative consequences for learning and the profession,” for decision-making and resource allocation (Gaiamo 10, Monty 37, Welch 105, Welch and Scott 8). Our fellow writing center colleagues acknowledge that neoliberal forces increasingly drive writing center decision-making, making it difficult to resist such forces; simultaneously, writing centers may be optimally situated to construct a bulwark against “neoliberal impositions” (Monty 37). However, the great irony of perceiving writing centers as invaluable sites for student learning—staffed by experts in the field of writing studies—is that, during times of financial distress, writing centers become targets for cuts; the rhetoric of perceived “value added” turns against student service sites and focuses, instead, on interventions and support for faculty. During times of plenty, WPAs can lean into their (albeit often imposed) identity as thought leaders in writing to launch writing services for faculty. In doing so, and because such an intervention serves the needs of those positioned near the apex of the higher ed hierarchy, writing centers can protect themselves from threats to their existence. In other words, service to faculty can be wielded as a shield against “neoliberal impositions” and can save writing centers and their staff from destruction. But at what cost? By capitulating to the perception that attention to faculty brings institutional security are we not also undermining the foundations of our centers’ missions and values? How do we, situated in the institutional borderlands of writing centers and writing programs, collectively navigate this treacherous terrain? How do we create defensible spaces in and from a contradictory positionality?

One response to that question has been to reinforce the crucial place of compositionists and our area-specific research within institutions of higher education, particularly given the unique labor conditions under which many of us struggle. We have been “making do in institutional borderlands” as we navigate the variations on administrative or hybrid positions typically tasked with delivering writing instruction at our universities. In such positions, moreover, as “contingent teachers or administrators” or “faculty on the margins... or as staff for extra-departmental entities” we also navigate “chronically underfunded introductory writing programs” which exacerbate the tenuous nature of our relationships to our scholarship (Welch & Scott 5). Importantly, scholarship exploring the vexed and vexing intersection between serving in administrative and research positions acknowledges that the very work which might best illustrate the unseen, undervalued labor we undertake collectively—the selfsame research that makes such labor visible—is often marginalized so that we might instead perform administrative tasks to document value, thereby ensuring continuity of services and making less precarious our very positions. Such scholarship has pointed to the “challenge of keeping up a research agenda while performing the overwhelming, and often low status, work of administering a writing program” (Söderlund and Wells 86) against the prevailing headwinds of neoliberalist energies. Yet those same spaces enforce evaluative standards that presume research and publications are the dominant manner of proving one’s relevance within our disciplines. As such, writing studies scholars have attempted to leverage the discourse of

scholarship and research to our advantage; the 2019 CWPA statement, for instance, “clearly positions writing program administration as scholarly, a positioning that many WPAs must explicitly make to their colleagues who see their work as mere management or service” (Söderlund and Wells 88).⁸ In other words, the most effective means of resisting “neoliberalist impositions” explored by our field thus far involves working collectively to recognize “how WPA work challenges research productivity” and to protect resources that enable us to engage in such scholarship (Söderlund and Wells 82). Yet most of our scholarly energy is—of necessity, given the systems we navigate—devoted to upholding the distinction between administrative writing and research-based writing with an emphasis upon demanding attention for the former. As with most of our efforts, these are fraught dynamics and the experience of locating a path of resistance can feel contradictory in nature.

For instance, convening writing collectives to advance scholarly achievement in faculty cohorts is one method of resistance that has recently drawn the attention of writing studies scholars. The collaborative nature of “Faculty writing groups... [makes them] a tool for dismantling neoliberal imperatives such as speed and competition” (Rifenburg and Johnston 240). Yet the impact and consequent “value added” of such groups must be tracked, cataloged, and documented in terms of participant numbers and, crucially, scholarly products, thereby reinforcing our reliance upon neoliberalist logics as a means of establishing value. Moreover, the pressure to emphasize contributions to scholarly pedigree as represented by publications in reputable outlets so as to justify the existence of such writing groups effectually plays into the neoliberalist handbook by tacitly embracing “productivity” as a marker of academic value.⁹ Indeed, RWS scholarship itself has consistently elided the contributions of WPAs, both faculty and staff, who occupy far more vulnerable positions in the neoliberalist institution.¹⁰ We are, admittedly, in a double bind. Because the neoliberal institution supports the production of certain types of scholarship over others—ladder rank faculty scholarship over non-ladder rank, permanent faculty scholarship over contingent faculty scholarship, faculty scholarship over staff scholarship—these hierarchies may well lead scholars in RWS to focus on ladder-rank faculty support, or even faculty support more generally, over supporting other forms of scholarship or effort. Doing so is a means of self-preservation for our field; that is, if WPAs and RWS scholars need to publish to maintain their positions within the university, they will likely opt to focus on the areas that the university supports most, namely ladder rank faculty. These pressures can contribute to scholarship that foregrounds the support of ladder rank

⁸ See CWPA Statement “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration.” (2019). https://wpacouncil.org/aws/CWPA/pt/sd/news_article/242849/_PARENT/layout_details/false

⁹ On the contrary, resistant acts could, instead, push back against the compressed timelines for publication that weighs heavily on many of us. To intentionally slow down this process is, in other words, a form of resistance as Rifenburg and Johnston suggest: “[W]e see speed as central to how the free market infringes on higher education. Thus, slowing down is a deliberate act designed to counter neoliberal impulses and an act that profoundly shapes writerly identity” (252).

¹⁰ See Wells, Jaclyn, Lars Söderlund, and Christine Tulley (Eds.). *Faculty Writing Support: Emerging Research from Rhetoric and Composition Studies* (2025) and Geller, Anne Ellen, and Michele Eodice. *Working with Faculty Writers* (2013).

faculty (Alexander and Shaver 58-86, Geller and Eodice 1-18, Rifenberg and Johnson 239-254, Wells et al. 3-13).. Even the titles of these scholarly works reinforce this paradox: *Working with Faculty Writers*, for example, explicitly names *faculty* as the writers worth “working with,” potentially reinforcing an exclusionary dynamic in the field that, again in response to the pressures of the neoliberal institution, ends up replicating and reinscribing those same neoliberal pressures. We hope to highlight this area as one potential space for the radical transformation of RWS. In dubbing our program the “Writing Circle for Staff and Teaching Faculty,” for instance, we took care to name explicitly teaching faculty, including non-ladder rank faculty as well as lecturers, as an area of support. We also placed staff before faculty to help challenge academic hierarchies. At the same time, we acknowledge the many other workshops and seminars we have held for educators on our campus where we have been explicitly instructed to center faculty in the event titles and to exclude staff.

One major takeaway from deploying our staff and faculty writing circle is that we are now cognizant that such structures offer the potential for resistance against the neoliberalist structures which form the bedrock of the academy. We also want to acknowledge that, slowly, our colleagues are becoming aware/conscious of terms of such radical possibilities for socioeconomic class transformation at our institutions and are taking the lead with their scholarship and praxis at their own institutions. Particularly encouraging is the scholarship of Micciche and Guy, who acknowledged in their recent study that, while their writing circles originally targeted faculty (by which we assume they are describing research faculty), the next iteration of their program will intentionally “[seek] out faculty participants from across varied disciplines and ranks and [include] university staff who also engage in academic writing—like our colleagues in student affairs” (Micciche and Guy 252, emphasis ours). We are hopeful that more scholarship of this kind will inspire members of our field to pursue programmatic transformation that includes career staff. Given our own social positionalities within our local institutional context, we attempted to make headway in this important work by imagining what radical outcomes might be achieved by integrating career staff into our writing circles from the beginning of the program. There are also specialized—we can go so far as to call them unique—aspects to our institutional ecosystem that made this decision a much more pragmatic approach to take. We describe these contexts below and we also offer suggestions for how our writing circles might be adapted for other institutional contexts.

Local Contexts

Our university, an R1 institution, features eight interconnected undergraduate colleges, each with their own academic approach, mission, and thematic concerns, into which students enroll for their general education requirements and writing requirements. These colleges are also “Living and Learning Communities” designed to help undergraduates experience a sense of belonging through residence halls and living communities attuned to their academic year and social identities. The college writing programs are the main site of introduction to writing and to expectations for navigating the landscape of higher education for undergraduate students. The writing programs employ a mix of educators, as each site considers their local needs and values and aligns their curriculum and hiring with those local contexts. They draw from a heterogeneous community of educators including those represented by unions (graduate

student teaching assistants and non-tenure-track lecturers) and the academic senate (teaching professors and ladder-rank faculty, both eligible for tenure) to educate our undergraduate students. Historical factors including the Covid-19 pandemic, recurring budget cuts in the state of California, and enhanced pay and benefits secured by our graduate student employee union have prompted these programs to shift away from graduate student employment and towards professional writing educators as the primary means of staffing educator lines.

Additionally, in 2023, the university's Executive Vice Chancellor agreed to convert formerly professional staff lines in the colleges to tenurable, non-ladder rank teaching professor lines. These positions had traditionally lacked academic senate representation and were staffed by individuals who frequently managed both heavy administrative and teaching loads. As a result of this university-wide conversion, associate directors of the colleges are now senate faculty: they have voting rights and benefits associated with holding tenure-track lines in the schools. These positions, importantly, primarily consider teaching excellence during the tenure review process. While there is an expectation that teaching professors will remain active in their academic fields, or "maintain currency in the profession and pedagogy," their positions do not have a formal research expectation built into the tenure and promotion process. However, these positions still value publication and public-facing scholarship and fall into the pattern of what as what Lynch-Binieck and Cox identify as including "stealth requirements...while they do not overtly require scholarship...materially, a lack of publication can have substantial consequences" (678). Though the stealth requirements of these job roles could, on the one hand, create confusion for individuals serving in these roles, we considered how such flexibility could enable more radical inclusion tactics for our writing circles. If, in other words, there were some stealth requirements in these newly-converted roles for us to leverage the need for writing support that would advance our writing program colleagues' research goals, we could also use that momentum to add career staff to our writing circles. Further, due to the conversion of staff lines to faculty lines, our local context nuances our understanding of the often arbitrary distinctions between staff and faculty in the academy.

Rationale

The inspiration for establishing a writing circle for staff and non-ladder rank faculty in our specific university context arose from a shared need for supported research writing time that Betty and Nicole noticed while discussing our scholarly backgrounds. In a remarkable coincidence, we realized that, in addition to our roles in the campus writing ecosystem, we both earned PhDs in literature with a focus on contemporary detective fiction. After discovering this shared scholarly interest, we began supporting each other in working on essays for an edited collection. Quickly, we each remarked on how challenging it was to make space for scholarship in our respective positions, Betty as professional staff and Nicole as non-ladder-rank faculty. Though we both have a strong desire to continue to contribute to scholarship in our shared field, neither of us has research time allocated in our job cards.

Wondering how many other staff and faculty across the university found themselves in the same position led to the germ of the idea for the writing circles. Rifenburg and Johnston articulate a desire to design writing groups in support of "faculty participants from across varied disciplines and ranks and including university staff who also engage in academic

writing” as a strategy to combat the exploitative and extractive practices of the neoliberal university (252). Our writing circle, intentionally functioning as a third space by bringing together non-tenure track (NTT) faculty and career staff, aimed to displace not only the “neoliberal imperatives” of the university at large but also the expectations surrounding whose scholarship counts as productive within a neoliberal framework.

Our professional experiences and backgrounds led us to believe that we were the right people to launch the writing circle. As directors of the university’s writing center, Chrissy and Betty have a wealth of experience facilitating writing workshops for faculty and graduate students across the university.¹¹ Previously, during her tenure as a writing center director at a small liberal arts college, Chrissy contributed to campuswide efforts to launch and sustain faculty writing retreats. As a former director of first-year writing at another institution, Nicole had the opportunity to observe her colleagues in rhetoric and composition start a focused writing circle with specific goals (Alexander and Shaver 58–86). The cross-section of our experiences, along with our current professional positions and scholarly needs, inspired us to pilot a writing circle that would help foster a community of collaboration and support between academic units that are not often paired despite this shared need. Shaver and Alexander write that “RWS scholars can use their disciplinary expertise to address a range of other institutional and systemic challenges” (58). We tested this claim by using our backgrounds to design a shared writing circle using best practices from RWS to support writers from across a range of disciplines.

In designating the scope of the writing circles, we strove to include those researchers whose scholarly labor is not traditionally valued by the university: professional staff, contingent faculty, and non-ladder-rank faculty. We observed that the hierarchical systems embedded in the neoliberal university work to silo these groups despite their shared credentials and closely related scholarly interests, as in the case of Nicole and Betty. At our institution, as with many others, with faculty and staff categorized into (frequently arbitrary) tiers, tensions and divisions can exist between colleagues. By inviting these three groups of researchers into community with one another, we sought to support writing-related needs while elevating frequently unseen labor.

We also hoped to make a case for the ongoing utility of the writing center as a vital support to staff and faculty, as well as graduate and undergraduate students. Remembering that “writing centers have historically served people from groups that the neoliberal academy has traditionally overlooked, underrepresented, and taken physical advantage of,” we wanted to support faculty and staff in a way that would both illustrate the broad reach of the writing center and destabilize hierarchies between academic ranks (Monty 42). From Nicole’s perspective as a WPA in an undergraduate writing program, collaborating with the writing center while holding a shared space for faculty in the writing programs irrespective of academic rank offered an opportunity to cross multiple deleterious barriers simultaneously. Chrissy and

¹¹ See our chapter “Contingency and Care: Reimagining Graduate Student Labor Through Writing Center Work” in this collection for more information about our graduate writing services.

Betty were able to provide a model for creating communities of practice and writing support for the various kinds of needs that writers encounter based on the writing retreats and smaller writing groups they already facilitate throughout the academic year. It is worth noting that campus leaders were not as sanguine about including staff and teaching faculty in our writing circle as we were. At one point, for instance, we were told that ladder-rank faculty needed to be included in order to defend the resources devoted to this work; in another instance, we were asked to pause submission on a proposal for funding the writing circle until more data emerged from our pilot.

Planning Process

In launching our writing circle, we decided to begin with a small pilot during a summer session to gauge interest. As facilitators we considered the timing to be ideal because our own academic responsibilities were slightly lessened and we had the bandwidth to launch a pilot. We created an interest form to consider the needs of those interested in participating, as we also wanted to gauge how high participation might be as we planned logistics. We reached out to our campus networks, contacting as many career staff, non-ladder rank, and non-Senate faculty as we knew and invited them to share the invitation widely. Based on survey responses and conversations, we decided to hold weekly meetings of two-hour blocks where participants could join us as their schedules allowed. Because we were hoping to include faculty with higher teaching loads, we scheduled blocks of writing time on alternating days (i.e., Monday, Wednesday, Friday; Tuesday, Thursday) and around campus course schedule times to increase potential availability across a range of teaching schedules. We also planned for a hybrid format of virtual and in person meetings. The in-person meetings would be held in a conference room at the university's writing center since it was the most centralized location for our participants coming from various distances across our campus.

Our vision for the writing circle meetings was to offer light facilitation to our colleagues to foster community and support, so we began each session with a check-in focused on intention-setting and accountability requests. For writing circle meetings, we considered various types of facilitations, including short workshops, guided discussions, and even peer-review sessions before deciding to ask our participants what they preferred to prioritize. Most indicated writing time without facilitated sessions, while others also wanted to consider a short time for check-ins. We decided to do five-minute check-ins at the beginning of each hour-long session and a final check-in at the end of the two-hour block. Participants were enthusiastic to learn about the types of writing projects from their colleagues; they wanted the shared community to discuss their writing experiences and ask for accountability during our writing time together. Writing circle meetings were held consistently through the next three quarters in this manner.

Examples of our facilitation included guided discussion on the value of setting writing intentions rather than writing goals and the utility of writing journals to keep track of ideas, tasks, and progress. During our goal-setting and accountability request time, we worked to build community by commiserating around the challenges we were facing and crowdsourcing solutions as well as offering encouragement. We used an OWL webcam to facilitate the discussion with participants in the Zoom space. The check-ins, which bookended each session,

offered structure and support to our participants. Because our participants had a range of demands on their time, we structured our sessions as two-hour blocks twice a week with participants having the option to attend one or both based on the needs of their schedules. We continued these options, including hybrid modalities and protected blocks of time with a drop-in option, throughout our next three iterations (fall 2024, winter 2025, and spring 2025).

Writing Circle SU24 to WI25 Impact

Assessment planning and development came from our shared interest in filling a gap for our teaching faculty and career staff colleagues. Nicole, situated in the undergraduate writing program, provided insights into the lack of support for teaching faculty and lecturers who wanted to produce scholarship but who lacked sufficient resources and protected writing time. On the other hand, Betty and Chrissy, from their vantage point within our campus writing center, collaborated with staff who were either working on scholarship, enrolled in graduate or certification programs, or pursuing administrative writing tasks to advance their careers and who also needed the protected time to develop their writing projects. Our assessment plan was to learn about the impact that the writing circles could have on the progress of writing projects, the range of writing projects typically pursued, and how the writing circles contributed to the career advancement of our participants. Our initial assessment included an interest form followed by formative and summative assessment tools such as intake questionnaires and exit questionnaires, distributed throughout the course of the pilot. Our current data was collected between summer 2024 and winter 2025; our spring 2025 writing circle cohorts were still meeting as we wrote this piece.

The initial interest form assisted us in developing the logistics and content focus of our meetings. It also allowed us to examine projected versus actual attendance. We had noticed high interest but low turnout in graduate writing retreats and workshops, so we wanted to keep this dynamic in mind with this population as well. The interest form asked about meeting times, professional development aspirations, and other interests participants might have in the writing circle. We received a total of 28 participant responses and, through word-of-mouth, added an additional 24 participants to our roster for a total of 52 prospective participants. Of those respondents, 28 identified as teaching professors, 14 were career staff, nine were Unit 18 Lecturers, and one serves as a college provost.¹² Of these broad categories of participants, teaching faculty and lecturers were affiliated with the undergraduate writing program, school of biological sciences, and school of social sciences. Staff were affiliated with various units and resource centers at our campus. The 28 original interest form responses indicated that participants were interested in working on articles (nine), manuscripts (seven), dissertation chapters (two), and conference papers (two). Participants were also asked to identify the type of support they needed in their writing: community (seven), writing support (six), accountability (six), space, accountability, snacks (3), and time/space (2). We learned that dedicated time and space, both physical and virtual, were desired. In terms of seasonal interest,

¹² Please see the Glossary in our Appendix for additional definitions on these academic titles.

we reasoned that summer would be an ideal temporal launch point: during these months we might have a better chance of increasing participation and creating a core cohort of participants. Hosting hybrid writing sessions would enable us to include those outside of our local area and provide more inclusive options for career staff navigating the demands of a 12-month work cycle.

Writing Circle Questionnaires and Data

The methodology for our pilot program review has included an aggregate analysis of all three quarterly intake surveys, exit surveys, and attendance tracking. Attendance tracking, wherein we also attempted to capture professional unit affiliation and modality, was conducted manually. The intake survey asked participants questions about their goals and intentions in joining the writing circles. Exit survey data was collected for summer 2024 participants and via a combined questionnaire for fall 2024 and winter 2025 quarters. We had a total of 28 responses to our quarterly intake questionnaires and 15 quarterly exit surveys, from which we identified 15 teaching faculty, 11 career staff, and one “other” response.¹³ Our response rates for questionnaires hover around 36 percent, which is similar to the response rates we see in undergraduate services.

Impact Data

Our impact & utilization instruments captured a total range of 189-193 engagements for the three quarters.¹⁴ Our participant cohort averaged ten attendees per fall and winter quarter with a highest turnout of 13 attendees. Our summer cohort averaged about eight attendees. Throughout the quarters we had 26 unique attendees and 18 repeating attendees. We have learned that engagement follows seasonal and weekly patterns; it is higher earlier in the quarter and at the start of each week. We reason that these patterns are due to the workload variations for our participant populations; teaching faculty are able to protect writing time more readily before the pressures to close the quarter descend. Likewise, career staff may be more likely to protect writing time early in the week, before weekly work demands overtake their calendars. Interestingly, engagement levels were higher for in-person meetings. Perhaps this is because we targeted educator and career staff populations, who tend to spend concentrated time working on campus. We also found that most attendees were faculty, which makes sense given the pressure to publish resulting from the aforementioned conversion of staff lines to tenurable faculty lines in our writing programs. The elements that lower the bar for participation, and therefore improve engagement rates, include “meeting frequency” and “meeting modality.”

¹³ In our Summer 24 exit survey we had 5 respondents that we could not identify as Teaching Faculty or Career Staff. Our forthcoming assessment efforts will include options for more nuanced responses in terms of professional positionality so that we might better understand our colleagues’ writerly needs.

¹⁴ This information was primarily gathered from our attendance data, of which we have two sets. This data has a +/- 4 margin of error. It is worth noting that we modified our survey questions slightly from one quarter to the next, hence our analysis here is presented based on quarterly results rather than as an aggregate for one academic year.

We distributed our preliminary interest form at the start of summer 2024 to survey interest in the writing circle pilot. The summer 2024 interest form captured about 30 participants' interest in the writing circles who were asked what type of support they would need. Responses indicated several key themes, including time, space, writing support, community, feedback, accountability, snacks, and being unsure. We qualitatively coded their responses based on recommendations for motivating factors we found in scholarship around faculty writing programs.¹⁵ From these varied responses, we aggregated the data into major categories indicating that within responses these were the popular themes of interest in the writing circles: community (23.3 percent), writing support (20 percent), and accountability (20 percent) as predominant drivers behind participation.¹⁶ We therefore extrapolated that our writing circles should aim to foster a sense of belonging and community for participants, enhance professional growth and career advancement opportunities, and provide opportunities for progress on writing in the form of improved writing skills and proficiency.

During the academic year, we conducted intake and exit surveys to track the general impact writing circles had on participants' writing projects within the areas of belonging, professional advancement, and writing progress. Our impact data for the academic year demonstrates that the initial themes of interest for participants changed: dedicated time, space, and accountability emerged as important, though fewer participants expressed the need for community. These original themes were identified predominantly by those participants who expressed interest in the program (n=30) compared to the smaller cohort actively engaged in our program, which averaged about 8 participants per quarter. We find it curious that the theme of "community" did not receive more initial interest and wonder whether this may have to do with the fact that academic writers navigate a value system that has socialized them to focus on more concrete objectives related to their research instead of the community-enriched practices which enable them to produce such work.¹⁷ Given this phenomenon, we wonder whether one mode of future resistance to neoliberal attitudes might include using writing circles to integrate discussions or activities that generate a sense of community, much like what we already incorporate into our separate writing retreat program.

The aggregate responses to our fall and winter writing circle surveys indicated that articles (26 percent), manuscripts (22 percent), and creative writing (22 percent) predominated in terms of writing projects pursued during writing circle sessions.¹⁸ Quarterly survey questions asked participants to indicate challenges in their writing, areas of support, and what they hoped for

¹⁵ See especially Geller, Eodice and Wells, Söderlund, and Tulley.

¹⁶ See appendix table 1

¹⁷ Sensibilities that prioritize individual practice rather than community and collaboration can be found in our writing retreat data as well. According to one attendee for our separate writing retreat program, the retreat experience "[C]onfirmed what I've always known - that contrary to what seemed to be an important guiding principle of the retreat, I work best on my own and it was sometimes distracting to be around other people if they were talking or just too close." Such a perspective aligns with the neoliberalist and white-supremacist philosophies that permeate our hyper-individualistic institutions. Writing Centers often contend with - and attempt to resist - such attitudes.

¹⁸ See appendix table 2

in the circles. Regular assessments indicated that participants' aspirations throughout the academic year tracked with our intake survey data: responses indicated a desire for regular writing time (30 percent), accountability (20 percent), time (20 percent), and space (16.67 percent) during their writing circle sessions.¹⁹ When we asked participants how these writing projects would contribute to their professional and personal goals, top responses included scholarship (37 percent) and publishing for career advancement (21 percent).²⁰ This last data point underscores the pressures to publish that the neoliberal institution exerts on faculty and staff, whose labor ostensibly resides outside of the publishing imperative.

In terms of participation rates and engagement, our exit survey data indicated that just over half of our participants were able to attend sessions more than three times. Factors influencing participants' return included the availability of hybrid participation options, scheduling, campus location and, when available, snacks. Responses also indicate that participants respond positively to our balance of facilitation with writing time. The data strongly suggests that brief check-ins, prompts to engage in goal and intention-setting, and reminders to take breaks help participants progress with their writing. Ultimately, the majority of participants shared that they had made progress on their writing projects (67 percent), while several started a new project (17 percent) or finished an existing project (17 percent). A sense of making progress, in other words, seems to be key in creating enduring, engaged cohorts of writers, no matter their positionality at our institution.

Qualitative Data

One major finding of our qualitative data is that non-ladder rank faculty and professional staff used our writing circle to carve out dedicated time and space for writing from positions that are not loaded for research. One source of inspiration for our writing circle, Shaver and Alexander's article, suggests that protected time and space for scholars to compose serve as a significant motivator for participants. Shaver and Alexander find that "[a] shared space also allowed pilot participants to be more protective of their writing time" (72) and our own qualitative data affirms this finding. One participant noted that "It's so helpful to have blocked off writing time," while another commented that "I really appreciated the dedicated space and time—I have tried to create this for myself in the past but I too easily don't keep the time guarded for writing specifically. This helped me do that." More typically, though, our participants juxtaposed the benefits of the dedicated time and space against the demands of their teaching and administrative responsibilities.

Many participants' comments reflect their desire to build writing time into their schedules when research is not an expectation of their job responsibilities. One participant commented that having weekly sessions helped with "commit[ting] to regular writing instead of always letting teaching and service stuff dominate my work time." Another indicated appreciation for "having a dedicated time and space to write with just enough social pressure to prevent me

¹⁹ See appendix table 3

²⁰ See appendix table 4

from skipping it in favor of other work demands (teaching/admin).” The encroachment of teaching and service on research time are familiar concerns for ladder-rank faculty too, of course, even with research as a major factor in their promotions.

Our participants’ qualitative feedback positioned this need for time and space as distinct based on their positions within the academy in two significant ways. The first was through an acknowledgement that some participants are working within career staff or non-ladder rank faculty roles through circumstance rather than preference. A participant noted an interest in writing circle participation because “I’m still interested in a TT position, so I’d need the publication.” This comment highlights one way that the neoliberal university instantiates hierarchies: scholars who accept non-ladder rank positions find it difficult to transition to tenure-track roles without publishing, but their roles do not offer the dedicated time for research that publication requires, limiting the possibilities for professional movement. Another participant’s comment highlighted that these restrictions can occur at multiple stages within the university, writing, “I took a leave of absence from my PhD program when I was ABD, so finishing my dissertation would allow me to finally finish my degree, and will hopefully diversify my career options in higher ed admin.” Regardless of whether the career goals are to continue in a career staff administrative capacity or to transition to a ladder-rank faculty role, our participants highlighted the need for scholarly writing (dissertation, publications) as a crucial component that necessitates the dedicated time and space for writing that their current positions do not provide.

Another significant finding was that the writing circles offered participants a means of pushback against a neoliberal system that, by devaluing their scholarly contributions, minimizes their identities as writers. One participant highlighted the tension of being trained as a scholar while working in a non-research position: “It is so hard for me to prioritize writing projects in my professional role... even seeing the writing circle in my calendar reminds me of this being a part of my life!” For this participant, the writing circle offered a space to “prioritize writing projects” as “a part of my life” in a way that the “professional role” cannot. Another participant alluded to the transgressive possibilities of carving out writing time from within a role that does not require it by calling out the “reserved time to write with ‘permission’ to shut off email, zoom/teams chat” the writing circles afforded. This comment frames the “email, zoom/teams chat” as a constant, inescapable presence in the workplace; the writing circle, then, seems to be a site that offers an opportunity for resistance to neoliberal expectations of productivity by fostering “‘permission’” to “shut off” that constant demand, albeit temporarily. It is possible that such “permission,” because it is sanctioned by and cloistered within a university entity, i.e. the university writing center, helps participants feel safer to express resistance than the otherwise panoptic surroundings of our university space, where work takes place in full view of the broader academic community. Our participant’s comments indicate the ways in which the writing circle may contravene the neoliberal university’s project, as participants make space for parts of their research interests beyond mere administrative objectives that simultaneously advance the overall mission of the university, though these pursuits may not (yet) be valued by the institution.

General Summary of Findings

After three cycles of data collection, we learned that our writing circle can accommodate both a cohort of regular participants as well as drop-in writers. Our hybrid modality of in-person and virtual space has allowed us to offer both accountability and flexibility and our standing schedule has helped participants prioritize writing time. Our participants valued light facilitation at the beginning and end of the scheduled meetings as well as the opportunity to build community with other writers who value scholarship and professionalization, regardless of the ways in which the university promotes these goals. Regardless of whether the circles are framed as sites of resistance against the neoliberal apparatus, they can function complex spaces that simultaneously affirm and reject the demands of the institution.

Implications and Recommendations

Before there were writing circles, there were “faculty writing retreats,” facilitated by our writing center director and funded by our partners in the Center for Faculty Diversity and Inclusion. The popularity and increasing demand of these retreats enabled our writing center to advocate for the faculty-staff writing circles we have now hosted for several years. The principles of our faculty writing retreat persist in our writing circles and leave us with much to consider. For instance, at the start of each faculty writing retreat facilitated by our writing center director, participants are asked to consider the following statement: “we are all writers.” It is an intentionally provocative assertion, prompting participants in the retreats and, now, in our writing circles to interrogate their own relationship to writing and confront, in some cases, their shared identities as writers with others, such as career staff and students, who are positioned elsewhere on our institutional hierarchy of value.²¹ The collective “we” in the statement serves as the cornerstone for the retreat experience: writing happens in community, writers exist as part of a community, and writers exist and matter across the institution. It is, given our surroundings, a radical concept and, yet, we have noted that the very title of the “faculty writing retreat” undermines the sense of equity and connection espoused by this statement. We have come to realize that the titles of our programming can illuminate the exclusive (rather than inclusive) nature of such experiences. In other words, the implication in the retreat title is that such experiences reinscribe the traditional, hierarchical distribution of value, which has historically centered “faculty” at the expense of career staff.

In our writing circles, then, we have subsequently, and intentionally, attempted to signal that a collective of scholars—the “we” for whom writing programs serve and of which we are all a part—should include career staff for whom writing serves as a means of advancing their own personal goals alongside those of the university’s. Based on our experience with staff-faculty writing circles, we are calling for a paradigm shift in writing program administration.

²¹ These retreats are hosted and resourced by our colleagues in the Center for Faculty Diversity and Inclusion. As such, the title of these events leverages the academic honorific “faculty” as both an acknowledgement of the office that supports these events and as a tacit reminder that faculty-facing services are appropriate sites for university resourcing. To date, we have not been able to include non-ladder faculty in our invitations to participate.

We take our cue colleagues like Evelyn Welch, who calls us to “[cultivate] as much as possible the spaces of solidarity and democracy where people really can come together for genuine exchange” (110). Writing centers especially must expand their “praxes to incorporate a broader range of identities, theories, and people... to resist the deleterious effects of neoliberalism” (Monty 44). Yet in both cases these scholars were not primarily imagining career staff in their calls to action. This is, ultimately, the most significant evidence we have of the “deleterious effects of neoliberalism”: that the socio-economic dividers that have been made invisible on a national scale by neoliberalism have always been part of the foundation of the academy. Since the inception of tenure, ladder-rank faculty have been situated as a privileged category of laborer in the university setting. Professional staff have been categorized as expendable.²² As with other socio-economic hierarchies that depend upon identities constructed upon the notion of difference and distance, writing program administrators are optimally positioned to disrupt, resist, and transform. We have models from our colleagues who have advanced the theory and praxis of anti-racist pedagogy in our institutions, and we should adapt those disruptive approaches and apply them within our own spheres of influence.

Herein lies the truly transformative potential of initiatives such as our own: to reimagine the academy as dependent not solely upon ladder-rank faculty labor but, equally, upon the labor, including the creative laboring behind public discourse, of all. What might such a radical reimagining look like in your local contexts? What transformations might unfold if we, as a field, began to upend the hierarchical value system by which we regard even our own scholarly and administrative undertakings? At our institution, for instance, this might involve expanding the definition of “primary investigator” to include staff members whose expertise—whether grounded in advanced degrees or traditional disciplinary discourse or not—would add value to the institution. Our institution’s writing programs do not rely on contingent faculty labor thanks to union protections for our Unit 18 lecturers, but of course many universities do depend on contingent faculty labor; we would, therefore, encourage our colleagues at those institutions to consider how our model might be adapted to support this faculty population as well. We might also consider the divide between academic and student affairs, which is only exacerbated by the privilege afforded to traditional academic faculty and staff. We are interested in exploring how writing circles might be a way to build coalition with our colleagues to become partners in further disrupting academic hierarchies.

In terms of writing circle outputs, we acknowledge that it remains problematic to focus on scholarly productivity as a primary measure of success, and that we may fall into the same traps of replicating neoliberalist perceptions of value. At the same time, we think it is imperative to ask how the importance of career staff writers can be framed as advancing a university’s values and vision in much the same way the research and writing of tenure-track

²² Unfortunately, during the editing process and before publication, one of our co-authors learned this all too well when she was laid off from her position due to budget cuts to the UC system. In a neoliberalist institutional setting, budget “situations” drive the machinery of higher ed to sacrifice staff who support student success rather than consider other approaches to address budget shortfalls. This dynamic is fertile ground for additional exploration, which the co-authors anticipate surfacing further in a forthcoming publication.

faculty is celebrated. What might it look like to measure the labor of writing that does or does not get accomplished by non-ladder rank faculty and staff? We want to raise the questions of what assessment and communication strategies we can implement to draw attention to the equal importance and labor of non-ladder rank faculty and staff writers in the academy. Overall, we are hopeful that our writing circle, and others like it, can contribute to a re-imagining of the neoliberal hierarchies constructed in the academy to privilege ladder-rank faculty scholarship above other forms of academic labor, and we are hopeful that the re-situations which can arise from such transformation will provoke and protect a sense of broader community within our institutions.

Appendix

Summer 2024 Intake Survey

6/6/25, 3:48 PM

Qualtrics Survey Software

General Information

Dear CSFT Writing Circle Participants,
thank you for joining us on our soft start for SS2 2024. We kindly ask that you fill out our brief questionnaire to capture your interests and needs during our writing time together. Thank you!

Full (lived) Name

Please share with us your pronouns.

Preferred Email for Writing Circle Communications

https://acsd.co1.qualtrics.com/Q-EditSection/Blocks/AJax/GetSurveyPrintPreview?ContextSurveyID=5V_2Uhw407R1CSOC&ContextLibraryID=UR_PYSlp/WsS... 1/6

UC San Diego Affiliation:

- UC San Diego Career Staff
- UC San Diego Teaching Faculty
- Other

Writing Circle In-Take Questionnaire

This reflection section asks about your writing project during SS2 for us to better understand the needs of the group and what resources we can provide.

During our SS2 Writing Circle, please describe what type of writing project you plan to work on (1-2 sentences).

What inspired you to work on this writing project?

How does this writing project advance your professional and personal goals?

Where are you excited to make some progress in this writing project?

What are you hoping for at our Writing Circles?

Writing Reflection

Please take some time to consider your writing practices, goals, and intentions. We kindly ask that you share with us your experiences to better understand the needs of the group and resources we can provide.

Do you feel comfortable with your current writing process?

- Definitely not
- Probably not
- Might or might not
- Probably yes
- Definitely yes

What are some of the challenges that you experience when embarking on writing project? (Feel free to use your current writing project as an example).

What strategies or tools have assisted you in addressing some of the challenges of writing?

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What do you feel is an area of need in your writing process? (please rank in order of importance for you).

- Dedicated Time
- Dedicated Space
- Developing habits for your writing process
- Understanding the writing process
- Community of Writers
- Writing tools and assistance (grammar, editing, organization, etc)
- Other
- Application of the Writing Process

if you indicated other, please explain below:

https://ncsl.eol.qualtrics.com/Q648Section/Blocks/AjaxGetSurveyPrintPreview?ConsentSurveyID=5V_3C3nw40781C9C6CConsentLibraryID=LR_PY3hgWb5... 5/6

What joys or "Ah-ha"! moments have you experienced thus far in your writing?

What aspects of writing remain interesting, inspiring, or provocative?

Anything else you would like to share with us?

Powered by Qualtrics

Spring 2025 Exit Survey (Instrument Also Used for Fall 2024 and Winter 2025)

Default Question Block

Thank you for participating in our CSTF Writing Circles. We'd appreciate your feedback to improve and gather impact data for our services.

UC San Diego Affiliaton

- UC San Diego Career Staff
- UC San Diego Teaching Faculty
- Other

Exit Questionnaire

The following questions pertain to your experience and writing progress in Spring 2025 quarter:

Please select about how many writing circle meetings you have been able to attend in SP25 quarter.

- Once
- Twice
- Three times
- More than three times

For spring quarter, please select if you feel that you:

- Made progress on your writing project
- Completed a writing project
- Started a writing project

Please reflect back on the progress that you have made and share with us about your experience. How did you feel about this progress?

The following questions ask you to reflect back on this AY year (SU24 to SP25) and your experiences in all the writing circles. Please fill this out even you only attended one session; we welcome your feedback.

Please select the quarters you have been able to participate in the writing circles. (Even if you came once, that counts!)

- Summer 2024
- Fall 2024
- Winter 2025
- Spring 2025

Please share with us what writing projects you have been able to complete and/or progress to final drafts during your participation with the writing circles AY2024-2025:

What has been the impact on your professionalization and/or career this year with the progress you have made in your writing projects at the writing circles SU24-SP25?

How do you feel about your writing before and after participating in the writing circles this academic year?

Would you like us to contact you for summer 2025 session 2 writing circles? If so, what is the best way to contact you in the summer?

Please share with us any feedback about your experience in the Writing Circles thus far (fall and winter). Is there

https://red.onl.qualtrics.com/Q-Edt/Section/BlockId/Ajpa/GetSurveyPrintPreview?ContentSurveyID=5V_FT6TDSCIRb0T06ContentLibraryID=1R_PU3q9k62&... 4/5

anything you would like share with us about your experience?

Table 1

In a few sentences, please tell us about the type of writing and communications support you would need in the fall.

Type of Support	
Time, Space	6.70%
Writing Support	20%
Space, Community	6.70%
Space	3.30%
Feedback	3.30%
Accountability	20%
Space, Accountability	3.30%
Community	23.30%
Space, Accountability, Snacks	10%
Unsure	3.30%

Table 2

Please describe what type of writing project you plan to work on (1-2 sentences).

Article	26.10%
Manuscript	21.70%
Creative Writing	21.70%
Conference	8.70%
Other	17.40%

Table 3

What are you hoping for at our Writing Circles?

Regular Writing	30.00%
Space	16.67%
Accountability	20.00%
Time	20.00%
Community	6.67%
Writing Support	6.67%

Table 4

How does this writing project advance your professional and personal goals?

Publishing for career advancement	20.90%
Scholarship and Pedagogy	16.70%
Scholarship	37.5%
Publish	8.30%
Other (goal planning, writing strategies)	16.70%

Table 5

If you participated in the fall or winter, please select if you feel that you:

Made progress on your writing project	66.67%
Started a writing project	16.67%
Completed a writing project	16.67%

Glossary

Throughout the article, we refer to different staff and faculty by certain institution-specific titles and some general titles that may have different meanings in different university systems. Here is a glossary of some terms we use:

Career Staff: University staff with graduate degrees, including PhDs.

Ladder Rank Faculty: Tenured/tenure track Academic Senate Faculty on a research track who are promoted on a research-based “ladder rank” system: assistant professor, associate professor, professor.

Lecturers: Synonymous with Unit 18 lecturers (see below).

Non-Ladder Rank Faculty: Tenured/tenure track Academic Senate Faculty on a teaching track who are promoted on a teaching excellence system: assistant teaching professor, associate teaching professor, teaching professor. Also called teaching professors.

Professional Staff: Synonymous with career staff (see above).

Senate Faculty: All faculty, both ladder rank and non-ladder rank, represented by the Academic Senate rather than an external union.

Teaching Assistants: Graduate student employees represented by a union.

Teaching Professors: Tenured/tenure track Senate Faculty on a teaching track who are promoted on a teaching excellence system: assistant teaching professor, associate teaching professor, teaching professor. Also called non-ladder rank faculty.

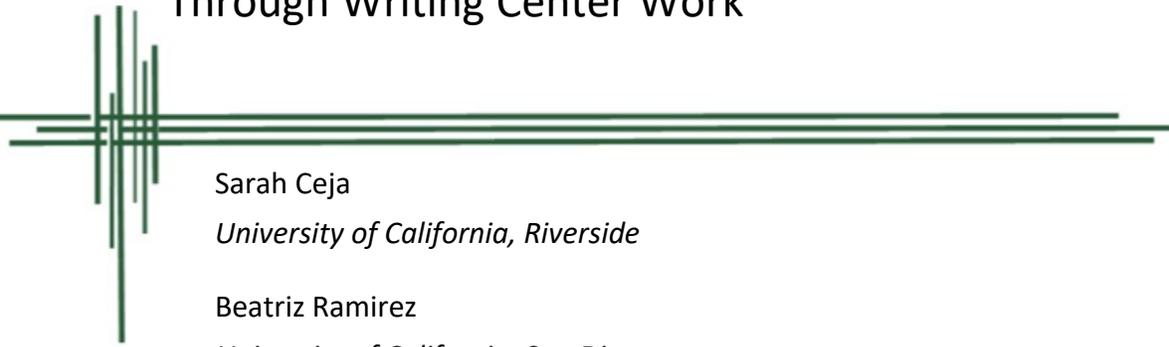
Unit 18 Lecturers: These are full-time teachers with benefits, not contingent faculty. They are not eligible for tenure, but they are eligible for continuing status after they teach at the university for 18 quarters (hence the name Unit 18 lecturers). They are represented by a union rather than by the Academic Senate.

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Contingency and Care: Reimagining Graduate Student Labor Through Writing Center Work



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Abstract

This article explores how graduate writing consultants (GWCs) working in a writing center at a public R1 university engage in forms of labor that both respond to and resist the neoliberal logics of higher education. Through a combination of critical reflection and collaborative case studies, the authors examine the emotional, intellectual, and infrastructural work performed by GWCs within a writing center that serves a diverse graduate population.

The piece highlights how GWCs, as contingent academic workers, play a crucial role in building peer support systems, facilitating professional development, and fostering inclusive academic communities—all while navigating institutional precarity and resource scarcity. Drawing from embedded tutoring programs and partnerships with campus affinity spaces, the authors illustrate how GWC-led initiatives serve as “infrastructures of care” that challenge dominant metrics of productivity and institutional value.

By centering graduate student labor and voice, the article intervenes in writing center and academic labor scholarship to argue for broader recognition of the affective and relational work that sustains graduate education. In a moment marked by budget cuts, shrinking services, and increased demands on student workers, this article asks what it means to sustain meaningful support in the absence of formal recognition or secure funding—and what possibilities emerge when graduate labor is treated not as expendable, but as essential.

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Dr. Christine Sharp is a writing scholar and educator who empowers writers at every stage to develop confidence, express their ideas, and communicate authentically across diverse contexts. Previously, she served as Director of the Writing and Communication Learning Services unit in UC San Diego's Teaching + Learning Commons. With twenty years of experience teaching writing and literature and leading writing programs, she is deeply committed to expanding access and belonging in higher education, especially for first-generation, low-income, and historically excluded students. A Latina and first-generation college graduate, Dr. Sharp brings her expertise in eighteenth-century British literature, the Gothic, and writing studies to her research and publications. She believes that everyone is a writer and champions writing as a transformative tool for connection and community.

Graduate writing support services are often framed as win-win offerings: they help students progress toward degree milestones and develop skills they'll need beyond the academy. In a recent [Inside Higher Education](#) piece, a writing center director touted the benefits of services provided by writing centers for graduate students—especially writing retreats—stating that they not only help “graduate students complete degree requirements” but also provide “sites for cultivating transferable skills.” Retreats are, according to the author, sites where graduate writers generate

important documents that achieve their professional goals and demonstrate membership in professional communities—such as journal publications, reports, white papers, grant applications or materials for job searches. Likewise, writing retreats provide space for practicing other transferable skills identified by the [Council of Graduate Schools](#), such as data literacy, analytics and scholarly ethics. (Homar)

The values stated here, of technical and disciplinary communication competencies, align with the academy's hyperfocus on productivity—publications, research, and grants—as primary sites of value. There tends to be more focus on these products and discourse that privileges professional advancement and placement rather than the human experience of completing a degree, the value of communicating within our discourse communities, and the sense of belonging and value therein. In this framing, writing support is celebrated for its alignment with institutional efficiency, not for its role in sustaining the emotional, intellectual, and relational labor that actually makes those outcomes possible.

We do not disagree that the aforementioned skills and “products” are important parts of graduate students' careers; however, we are equally concerned with the informal systems—often unmeasured and undervalued—that sustain a graduate student's lifecycle in the academe. We use “lifecycle” intentionally here, because in our own experiences as administrators, we

have seen how this term has been appropriated within neoliberal university discourse. Rather than signaling a period of organic, ongoing scholarly growth, “lifecycle” has come to demarcate the increasingly discrete limits within which a student may remain enrolled: shortened time-to-degree deadlines, rising labor and research expectations, and shrinking financial support. These pressures create conditions in which the removal of community-based supports, particularly writing support that cultivates transferable skills, may have serious implications for student well-being, persistence, and development.

Our graduate writing services have helped us notice another story unfolding: one that centers not just on productivity, but on community, trust, and care. Consider, for instance, programmatic data that we have collected that acknowledges sense of belonging as vital to graduate student success:

“Trust is crucial for some things such as job applications and dissertation writing and your consultants make a great job at building trust.”

“The Writing Hub provides instrumental support to graduate students on our campus.” “Without the Writing Hub, graduate students would be left with little institutional spaces to build writing community with one another.”

“[My consultant] created a welcoming environment for us to share our progress, no matter how small.”

Trust, community, a welcoming environment: these and similar phrases signifying the benefit of engaging with our services regularly appear in our students’ responses. Yet institutional measures of success—much like those highlighted above—rarely consider the co-communicative dynamics that lead to academic and personal success for our graduate student population. What are we to make of such omissions and emphases?

We consider this question especially for our GWC team, who works to uplift graduate writers through the unspoken, underidentified aspects of the graduate student experience. If such “soft” skills—which, importantly, provide a backbone to the kinds of “transferable” skills that are more visible at our institutions—are not valued by the academe or considered an equal part of the graduate experience, what place can (or should) writing services play in this “lifecycle” of graduate students and their careers?

Increasingly, we have been confronted with this question as we navigate a changing landscape involving ongoing reductions in resources for graduate writing support. However, we’ve also continued to come back to our community as a source of support and strength—not just for our GWCs, but for the graduate students they work with, too. Consultants and students alike continue to cite our space as a haven: a safe learning environment where they feel empowered to take control of their own professional and personal journeys. By reflecting on our experiences—its successes, tensions, and ongoing questions—we aim to shift the conversation around graduate student labor in writing centers. This labor is often informal, affective, and hard to quantify, yet it remains essential. It is through this contingent labor that writing centers can function as critical infrastructures of care, especially for graduate students navigating an increasingly precarious university. We hope this piece contributes to a larger conversation about the future of labor in higher education—and how graduate writing services might offer a small but powerful model of resistance, connection, and possibility.

Throughout this article, “we” refers to the collaborative team of the Graduate Writing Consultant Coordinator, the Associate Director, and the Director of the Writing Center, who oversee graduate writing support programming. When the first-person singular “I” appears, it refers to Sarah in her role as GWC Coordinator and graduate writing tutor, drawing directly on her situated experience working with graduate students, developing and leading tutor development, and managing program initiatives.

Contingent Labor and Graduate Student Employment

To understand what graduate student contingency labor is, we first consider the kinds of work (both visible and invisible, paid and unpaid) that graduate students perform throughout their programs. These students face a complex labor landscape shaped by variable funding structures across disciplines, degree levels, and institutional contexts. Some students receive stable multi-year funding packages, while others rely on competitive internal or external employment opportunities to support themselves. These uneven structures create conditions under which many graduate students must pursue additional work—sometimes within their departments, sometimes elsewhere on campus—to sustain their studies and cover basic living costs.

These dynamics reflect what Bousquet identifies in *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* as the broader corporatization of the American university, in which graduate labor becomes increasingly essential yet structurally obscured. As he argues, the contemporary university depends on layered forms of contingent labor while simultaneously rendering much of that labor invisible. This framing is especially instructive for understanding graduate writing center work, which often falls outside traditional academic employment structures and is therefore easily overlooked in institutional accounts of graduate labor. Martin’s earlier analysis in *Chalk Lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University* provides an important historical precursor, documenting how graduate workers—particularly within our home system, the University of California—have long contested these conditions. He describes graduate-employee organizers as “meeting the State head on” in challenging the university’s authority to unilaterally define the terms of their employment (Martin 4–5). Situating GWCs within this lineage helps illuminate how their present-day labor conditions are shaped by decades of struggle over recognition, employment status, and the value of academic labor itself.

Our primary focus in this article is on doctoral students who take on contingent labor to fill gaps or seek alternatives to departmental funding.²³ Writing centers often become part of this landscape, especially when, as in our case, the center is housed outside academic departments and functions as an external employment opportunity. In some cases, where the writing center is part of an academic department, writing center employment may be classified differently (e.g., as a teaching assistantship). On a large scale, graduate student contingency labor can result from the funding available from students’ field-specific programs and institutions, and, on a more local level, from competition for non-departmental contingent employment (on- or

²³ We focus on doctoral students as we hire them primarily as writing tutors.

off-campus), fellowships, and grants. Our writing center is not part of an academic department, but rather part of a larger Teaching and Learning Commons and is therefore able to provide external employment that can either be supplemental to or integrated with a student's primary academic funding.

Graduate students can experience contingency labor based on their academic discipline and the opportunities those disciplines have for institutional and external funding.²⁴ The socioeconomic context of an institution's location, as well as the diverse backgrounds/needs of students (e.g. caregivers and parents, single, out-of-state, low income, etc.), also play a factor as we consider what basic living costs may require students to seek out these kinds of jobs. On our campus, for instance, rising living costs have led to growing participation in basic needs programs. Campus data shows a marked increase in food insecurity among graduate students from 2021 to 2023, prompting expansions to our Food Pantry and the establishment of a Basic Needs Hub.²⁵ This all factors into the demand from students for employment, albeit contingent or non-departmental, that can help supplement living costs.

While some graduate students have secure funding that allows them to focus exclusively on their research, many must balance multiple roles—as teaching or research assistants, readers, housing community assistants, and more—in order to make ends meet. Graduate students are often put in a position to compete within their own department or campus for these limited positions, and these roles often extend beyond the boundaries of compensated time. The labor of mentoring undergraduates, managing lab groups, answering emails, and sustaining emotional support systems for peers can become a significant, unpaid demand. This hidden or informal labor plays a key role in the academic ecosystem yet is rarely recognized when gauging productivity or success in these roles.

The effects of graduate student contingency labor, then, expand beyond monetary needs and labor market competition and reveal a tension between their primary work (increased scholarly output and progress toward degree completion) and the need to secure financial stability. In contrast to undergraduate enrollment—which is typically seen as a financial generator for institutions—doctoral student enrollment is often framed as an expense or cost because they must generate the funds to pay students for their research, teaching, and other tasks related to their doctoral program. Doctoral students' research, scholarship, teaching and other program-related tasks function through a logic of production and labor at the onset. Hugo Horta, Mattia Cattaneo, and Michele Meoli's studies on graduate funding and Ph.D. doctoral degree completion indicate the correlation between graduate student research production and the completion of their doctoral degree; they consider how high number of publications and a shorter time to completion make graduate students competitive in the academic job labor market (Horta et al.).

Institutions and academic departments stress degree-completion timelines, which creates a demand for graduate student labor for production of research, scholarship, grants, and more.

²⁴ See appendix Table 1 for data on dollar funding per discipline at our campus 2023-2024; notable differences across disciplines can be noted.

²⁵ See appendix Table 2 for data graphs and data information.

This facet of the experience ultimately competes with the additional work that many doctoral students must take on to fill in their financial gaps. From this vantage point, our center exists both within and against institutional logic. As an employment site, it reflects the contingent labor landscape that many graduate students must navigate. But as a non-academic department and mentoring space, it also provides a countermodel: one that centers care, mutual support, and the development of shared scholarly practices. The writing center becomes a space where labor—though still precarious—can feel less extractive and more relational, offering graduate students a rare site of connection amid increasingly isolating and competitive conditions.

Graduate Writing Tutoring Labor in the Neoliberal University

A growing number of writing studies scholars are exploring the impact of neoliberalism in public universities, examining how writing centers are entangled in the structures, ideologies, and practices shaped by neoliberal logics. These studies consider neoliberalism as both an economic structure and political ideology that has increasingly shaped the landscape of higher education. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as “an ideological, economic and political project that posits unrestrained ‘individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills’ as the primary guarantors of ‘human well-being’” (Harvey 2). The term “neoliberalism” is now commonly used to describe the global and local dynamics transforming educational institutions (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 4–5).

Scholarship in composition studies has similarly traced how neoliberal political economy reshapes the day-to-day conditions of writing programs. Scott and Welch note that these austerity logics influence “not only writing assessments, curricula, and funding but teacher’s agency and philosophies of program administration” (12). Their framing makes visible how programs like ours operate within an institutional environment that increasingly treats pedagogical and administrative labor as sites of efficiency, accountability, and cost containment rather than as relational and intellectual work.

Following Giaimo and Lawson’s “Writing Center Labor in the Neoliberal University,” we build on their insights by examining how neoliberal structures impact graduate student tutors through a process of collaborative autoethnography (Vander and Aspenlieder). As Vander and Aspenlieder note, collaborative autoethnography enables researchers to analyze shared experiences in ways that reveal layered, intersecting perspectives not accessible through individual reflection alone. This method also allows us to foreground experience as a vital site of inquiry, resisting positivist assumptions that often dominate scholarship on teaching and learning (287). Its emphasis on situated, relational knowledge is particularly suited to examining graduate programming in writing centers, where our roles overlap but are not identical. In particular, we are interested in how neoliberalism creates an ideology and praxis of “students as consumers and faculty as service providers” that “has dominated global practices in colleges and universities for some time” and extends into the graduate student experience (Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg 155). Graduate students’ precarity reflects neoliberal patterns in which research and scholarship are valued as commodified outputs rather than as transformative practices that support the development of emerging scholars.

As Scott and Welch argue, neoliberalism has ushered in dual forms of privatization in higher education: corporate privatization, which moves commodifiable aspects of university

work to the market, and domestic re-privatization, which shifts essential but non-profitable forms of labor into the realm of unwaged or volunteer work. This social reproductive labor lens helps illuminate the position of GWCs, whose relational, emotional, and pedagogical labor is vital to graduate student success yet remains structurally undervalued and largely invisible (15).

Wright demonstrates how neoliberal university branding actively erases the labor of graduate student workers. In her analysis of the University of Houston's Tier One campaign, she shows how graduate labor becomes disposable in service of institutional prestige ("The Rhetoric of Excellence"). Wright also argues that the dominant narrative of the graduate student as an "apprentice" learning a trade rhetorically obscures the very labor that institutions depend on for their daily functioning (276). This framing offers a critical lens for understanding the position of GWCs, whose work is often conceptualized as developmental rather than essential, reinforcing their invisibility within administrative narratives.

In this article, we use *care* to refer to a set of relational and labor-intensive practices that foreground people's well-being, intellectual growth, and dignity within contexts that often deprioritize these values. Our understanding draws from care ethics traditions that define care as a practice of attending to and supporting others within unequal or precarious structures (Tronto "Moral Boundaries" 1993; de la Bellacasa) as well as scholarship in writing center studies that conceptualizes writing support as an affective, feminist, and community-oriented endeavor (Denny; Salem). We build on this foundation through what we term an *infrastructure of care*: an informal, affective, and relational system of support that operates counter to the isolating and efficiency-driven logics of neoliberalism. Prior work in the field—such as the 2020 *WLN* special issue—positions tutors' emotional labor, boundary-setting, and well-being as central to writing center practice. While we elaborate on this framework more fully in a forthcoming project, we offer this working definition to clarify the commitments guiding our case studies.

Our writing center is part of a teaching and learning center within Academic Affairs at a large R1 public institution. As non-ladder-rank career staff members working in a neoliberal university setting, we too occupy vulnerable positions at our institution.²⁶ Writing centers often serve as employment sites for graduate students, yet these roles come with institutional limitations. We observe how rhizomatic, contradictory neoliberal ideologies ask us to "train both students and faculty to align themselves with market subjectivities," to be both student-centered and aligned with market-based measures of success (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 4; Bazaldua et al.). Our work strives towards social justice, yet we contend with "the contradictory praxis of higher education institutions promoting (individual) success while being dependent on public support vis-a-vis local and federal funding" (Monty 39).

Writing centers differ widely in structure and resource allocation, which subsequently impacts availability of services. Our inclusion within a learning commons structure enables "a

²⁶ See Fels, Dawn "The Risks of Contingent Writing Center Directorships" in Kahn, Seth, William B. Lalicker, & Amy Lynch-Binieck (Eds.). (2017). *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition*.

sense of interconnectedness, provides a space for synergistic relationships, increases the possibility for deep and authentic collaboration, and creates opportunities for all learning commons professional and student staff members to think more expansively about the kinds of writing and learning students are engaged in both inside and outside the classroom” (Blackmon et al. 28). Even so, we remain subject to fluctuations in funding and shifting institutional values, much like our writing center colleagues. Despite these challenges, we have worked to preserve the writing center as a kind of “third space” for resistance—an alternative site that challenges neoliberal constraints.

As future sections will show, our graduate writing program in particular provides the energy driving these pockets of resistance. GWCs often find this space to be one of community and support, in contrast to other institutional settings that feel siloed and isolating. Although the peer-to-peer work they do is emotional and demanding, they report a stronger sense of belonging within our writing center than in many other areas of campus.²⁷ We posit those spaces and experiences are symptoms of navigating a broader neoliberal ecosystem that governs academic labor.

To the extent that resistance is possible, our center actively identifies and critiques the neoliberal practices that shape our work. As we puzzle through what resistance and resilience look like, we know that we contend with systemic and structural processes that require various levels of intervention— sometimes not within our reach. As Giaimo and Lawson have recently noted,

While many writing center workers have tried to resist neoliberal impulses, there is a trend within writing center scholarship that ironically embraces the logic of neoliberalism—such as through extolling assessment and data—even as it argues that such practices can serve as a buffer against some of the neoliberal practices detailed above... part of the managed university includes using data (and other empirical markers of success like revenue) to justify budgets or to seek external privatized partnerships as a way to maintain funding. (“Writing Center Labor,” 10)

We aim to practice and theorize a kind of writing center labor that exists in this “third space”: one that critiques, navigates, and creatively responds to structural challenges. To inform our work, we draw upon social justice scholarship like Laura Greenfield’s, which frames higher education reform work as confronting institutional oppression of minority, BIPOC populations. Our approach insists on intersectional, systemic resistance that acknowledges graduate student labor as both shaped by and pushing back against neoliberal structures. Writing center studies not only critiques neoliberalism but also demands actionable strategies for justice and change. Through our collaborative autoethnography, we hope to share lessons learned, reflect on interventions we’ve attempted or found out of reach, and contribute to ongoing efforts to reimagine writing center work in more equitable and humanizing ways (Monty).

²⁷ Mannon explains tutor labor as starting “from emotional labor, the application of that emotional intelligence” in one-on-one appointments with their peers; the circumstances and context are higher stakes as graduate students express their fears with failing their academic program, not being productive enough, and academic relationships.

Shifting Landscapes for our Graduate Writing Services

The GWC role at our institution has evolved significantly since the establishment of the Teaching and Learning Commons around 2017. At that time, the Writing Hub—the title by which our writing center is commonly known at our campus—had a thriving graduate writing program. By 2021, we employed 15 GWCs from across disciplines, supporting graduate students through one-on-one appointments, campus workshops, a virtual writing room, writing retreats, and two embedded graduate tutoring programs in Social Sciences departments (Sociology and Anthropology). The embedded initiative began in 2017 with our Sociology department, catalyzed by a GWC whose academic home was in that department.

However, beginning in 2022, when graduate student employees and their unions began to demand cost-of-living increases and equitable wages, our institution's administration implemented a series of significant, increasingly drastic resourcing cuts. These changes were justified by the administration as necessary offsets to rising labor costs—an application of neoliberal logics that value market efficiency over pedagogical need. As a result, our graduate writing services were significantly scaled back to align services with historical usage data and increasing fiscal constraints. In 2025, we currently employ only seven GWCs, and the scope of services has narrowed to one-on-one consultations, limited writing retreats, our two embedded programs, and a newly launched Dissertation Writing Circle initiative (which is facilitated by professional staff as opposed to GWCs). Workshops and the virtual writing room have been discontinued, and on the horizon is the sunsetting of embedded tutor programs. The future of GWC employment at our center remains uncertain.

In the following case studies, we highlight the tradeoffs involved in these shifts, limitations, and the lived realities of our GWCs and staff navigating this climate. As part of our ongoing resistance to these pervasive forces, we present some of our creative solutions that have assisted us in navigating this changing landscape.

Background: Behind the Numbers

The most recent reductions, occurring between Winter 2024 and Spring 2025, required the most significant and complex restructuring of our graduate services to date. In response, our team initiated a comprehensive audit of our program, assessing budget documents, utilization data, and student experience surveys. We also incorporated GWC perspectives to help us create an impact narrative report of our graduate services, which we then forwarded to the Academic Affairs office.

When reporting to our internal administrative unit—which then transmitted our impact narrative to our Academic Affairs office, we found ourselves needing to advocate for evaluation criteria that moved beyond raw appointment numbers. Given declining graduate enrollment and shifting patterns of use, total visits alone could not reflect the ongoing need for—and outcomes of—graduate writing support.²⁸ To more accurately represent the scope

²⁸ We had to advocate for a similar approach in measuring the impact of our undergraduate services as well. Whereas other learning services relied solely upon visit numbers to justify their impact, the nature of 1:1 peer

and significance of our work, we supplemented quantitative data with qualitative narrative: testimonials, tutor reflections, and context-specific analysis. Although this qualitative evidence was not requested, we believed it necessary to articulate our program's true impact—not only on the graduate students we serve but on GWCs themselves.

We were acutely aware that our own positionality as contingent employees shaped the limits of what we could challenge. Our staff's vulnerability mirrored that of the GWCs we supervise, whose positions have always been marked by precarity. The material and emotional consequences of service reduction weighed heavily. We worried not only about the sustainability of our programs but also about the trust we had cultivated with our GWCs, the collaborative ethos of our center, and the foundational commitments to equity, growth, and care that shape our pedagogical practice and enable us to see and serve the humanity of graduate students.

So, while the quantitative and data-driven analysis catered to an administrative audience, our insistence that qualitative analysis should find a way into our overall narrative emphasized our commitment to confronting neoliberal logics with meaning and humanity. While higher administration may desire more quantitative measures of graduate student outcomes, meaningful tracking of the long-term impact of writing center engagement presents significant challenges for us. Currently, we do not have access to institutional data tied to student identifiers (such as student ID numbers), which limits our ability to correlate graduate student use of our services with outcomes such as publications, academic placements, or time to degree. Quantitative reporting beyond attendance or utilization metrics would require voluntary (and often varied) participation from students themselves, adding layers of complexity and potential self-selection bias.

Consequently, while quantitative data could complement our qualitative insights, a rigorous and administratively satisfying dataset would likely need to combine voluntary longitudinal tracking with institutional data access—a level of infrastructure that is presently beyond our capacity. In the absence of such mechanisms, we believe that our collaborative autoethnographic approach and qualitative observations provide the richest, contextually grounded understanding of graduate student development, peer mentorship, and the relational labor that sustains our services.

It is with an abiding belief in the power of narrative to create forces of resistance that we focus most of our attention upon the stories and initiatives of our GWCs themselves. By doing so, we position ourselves alongside other scholars in writing center studies who call for resistance strategies grounded not only in critique but in humanizing, justice-oriented action.

tutoring—compared to group tutoring and supplemental instruction—as well as the vastly different learning needs associated with writing and communication skills necessitate a different approach to measuring impact. It is worth noting that, in all of these conversations, qualitative data was neither requested nor reviewed. The neoliberal logics of our local contexts demanded only quantitative data—in the form of basic participation—as a means of making widespread decisions regarding the delivery of services.

Case Study 1: The Care Work Behind the Consultation

In this case study, we draw on our own experiences as graduate writing program administrators to examine the opportunities and limitations of Graduate Writing Consultant (GWC) work through individual writing consultations and writing retreats. By situating ourselves within this analysis, we acknowledge that our understanding of GWC labor emerges not from detached observation but from our daily participation in and responsibility for this work. We aim to: (1) contextualize the mentoring and consulting work of GWCs using the training materials and professional development activities we design and revise; (2) examine the contingency of their labor as graduate students and peer workers whose employment remains precarious; (3) illustrate how GWCs navigate institutional structures while building meaningful, reciprocal relationships with peers; and (4) complicate the notion that writing center work “protects” graduate student employees from the most extractive forms of institutional labor. We suggest instead that this role simultaneously fosters a sense of care and community while asking for heightened emotional and academic labor. Our position as coordinators and co-learners alongside GWCs allows us to see how their contingent work and community building constitute an infrastructure of care—an informal, affective, and relational system of support that operates counter to the isolating and efficiency-driven logics of neoliberalism.

We begin training for GWCs with a foundational workshop titled “Impostor Syndrome and the Role of GWCs,” which one of our returning consultants co-developed and leads each hiring season. As the program coordinator, I participate in this session alongside new tutors and have witnessed how Villarreal’s autoethnographic piece, “Impostor Syndrome in the Writing Center,” invites incoming GWCs to reflect on their own experiences of self-doubt and anticipate how such feelings may emerge in their work with students. The session includes affirmation writing, group discussion, and the exploration of hypothetical situations in which tutors may feel underprepared or overwhelmed—for instance, when working with students from unfamiliar disciplines or writing genres. Over time, we have come to recognize this workshop as an early moment when GWCs begin naming the social reproductive labor that often proves critical, yet at times hidden, to their roles. Framing this labor as both intellectual and affective also establishes expectations for transparency, growth, and authentic engagement—values that shape not only their consultations but our broader approach to fostering a care-oriented community.

These conversations also initiate a critical ethos of shared vulnerability and trust among the GWC cohort—something we have observed deepen each year. As consultants share their worries, hopes, and questions, we see the relational fabric necessary for peer mentorship and collaborative problem-solving take shape. Although this community-building is neither quantified nor formally acknowledged in university metrics, it consistently emerges in our team meetings as essential to the effectiveness of graduate writing support. From our vantage point, these affective and relational investments form a foundational component of our program’s infrastructure of care—one that subtly but powerfully resists neoliberal emphases on productivity and quantifiable outputs.

In subsequent training modules that I have designed and facilitated, I worked with GWCs to deepen their understanding of the systemic contradictions inherent in graduate education. Drawing on Starke-Meyerring’s “The Paradox of Writing in Doctoral Education,” we discuss

the tension between institutional demands for autonomous scholarly productivity and the often invisible labor of disciplinary acculturation. We introduce Rosenberg's work on nonviolent communication as a tool for responding empathetically to students' emotional and rhetorical needs, and we highlight scholarship by GWCs at UC Davis as examples of peer researchers actively shaping knowledge within writing centers (Wittstock et al.). These texts have helped us articulate, with consultants, how their work intersects with broader questions of labor, identity, and relational practice.

These readings and discussions reinforce ideas central to our [program philosophy](#), which acknowledges that the long process of disciplinary becoming can entail years of considerable, if hidden, struggle (Starke-Meyerring). In our work with GWCs, we have seen how meaningfully supporting graduate writers requires

supporting them in that long, often messy, and sometimes isolating process. Graduate student writing support thus sits at the intersection of academic support (student success), professional development, and social/emotional well-being (Gray). As a result, graduate writing support programs must also incorporate empathetic, affective support for students who may be struggling with overwhelm, confusion, loneliness/isolation, and, potentially, exclusion. ("Graduate Student Services")

Recognizing this complexity has shaped how I, as a coordinator, structure training and how we as a team understand the emotional terrain GWCs must navigate. That they do so while navigating similar pressures and vulnerabilities as graduate students themselves underscores the relational, co-experiential dimension of their work—another facet of the care-based infrastructure they help construct.

These ideas play out in real time during our weekly GWC staff meetings, which function as spaces for horizontal mentoring, community building, ongoing co-learning, and graduate service co-design. In these meetings, consultants facilitate learning for their peers, raise questions about service delivery, and reflect collectively on challenges and successes. These sessions, and the trust that makes them open spaces, allow me to gather qualitative insights that, in turn, inform our approach to services.

One moment that illustrates the value of this infrastructure occurred during Fall 2024, when several GWCs mentioned repeated sessions with distressed students during a weekly meeting. As we listened, it became clear that these interactions were taking an emotional toll, leading to signs of burnout across the cohort. In response, we reshaped the next several meetings to unpack the issue together. GWCs shared experiences, identified patterns, and co-developed strategies for managing emotional labor. We read and discussed scholarship related to emotional labor, including Giaimo's "Toward an Intersectional Praxis of Emotional Labor in The Writing Center."²⁹ As one new GWC reflected, "It was surprising how much of the work we actually do entails this emotional side—I guess I was not expecting it." These conversations

²⁹ See also Driscoll, Dana Lynn, and Jennifer Wells. "Centering the Emotional Labor of Tutors." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2020. <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/2197dcd3-bc4e-47d4-884c-3dbf9ebab4eb/content>.

also prompted us to consider how our program might better scaffold emotional labor and clarify boundaries for consultants.

As this exchange demonstrated, GWC work often demands a broad range and intensity of labor that can blur the line between peer and professional, student and service provider. In these moments, we have found ourselves balancing empathy for consultants' experiences with the responsibility of setting humane expectations. We emphasized that tutors should not carry the burden of this work alone, since larger institutional factors shape the needs they encounter. As administrators, we are committed to prioritizing the well-being of GWCs; after all, meaningful academic and emotional support for graduate writers is impossible when the consultants providing it are stretched thin or unsupported themselves.

By creating space for reflection, peer mentoring, and vulnerability, our GWC program cultivates a collective care that stands in contrast to the individualistic and efficiency-driven logics dominating higher education. Even as their labor remains contingent, GWCs help build this infrastructure of care in ways that sustain consultants, student writers, and staff alike. Our roles within this process—listening, adjusting, co-learning, and co-designing—position us alongside GWCs in resisting neoliberal norms and nurturing the relationships that make this work possible.

Case Study 2: Embedded Support as Labor and Resistance

Another dimension of GWC work involves leading initiatives and representing our program in cross-campus partnerships. In our roles as the GWC coordinator, Associate Director, and Director of the Writing Hub, we have often found that this work requires moving across institutional boundaries in ways that mirror the mobility and precarity of graduate student labor itself. These partnerships distribute the large load of supporting our graduate scholar population, as we know that any one university department or unit (including writing centers) would find it impossible to 'shoulder the weight' of graduate writing support alone (Simpson 95). In the context of our teaching and learning center, such partnerships are essential to sustaining our work and maintaining close ties with the communities we serve. Our program is unique in that we partner not only with academic departments but also with campus affinity centers to coordinate embedded tutor workloads and identify high-impact sites for writing support. While the Writing Hub bears the full training load, the majority of assessment responsibilities, and a significant share of resource demands, we view this labor as a meaningful—if often institutionally undervalued—investment. As administrators, we have repeatedly witnessed how these partnerships surface tensions between institutional expectations and the relational forms of care that GWCs enact. We pursue these collaborations as part of our broader effort to challenge dominant rhetorics of value at our institution, which often reduce success to numerical participation rather than relational or developmental impact.

Much of the literature on graduate writing studies has established and advocated for the importance of communities of practice (CoPs) in aiding transitions from graduate students to scholars and professionals in their fields (Bell and Hewerdine; Phillips; Gradin et al.; Coffman et al.). They articulate the need for low-stakes, flexible, community-driven group spaces where graduate students can co-develop their scholarly identities and ethos (Phillips). Drawing on this scholarship, our writing program has supported formalized CoPs facilitated by GWCs and

embedded within broader institutional structures. In doing so, we have also reflected on our own roles within these structures, particularly as we worked alongside GWCs to shape these initiatives. These include consultant-led partnerships with APIMEDA Programs and Services, the Black Resource Center (BRC), and the Sociology and Anthropology departments. Together, these efforts have contributed an infrastructure of care—one shaped by values of community, autonomy, validation, and equity, and one designed to support students' growth as both writers and scholars.

Graduate writing groups made possible through these partnerships, both embedded and affinity-based, are not simply helpful, but rather part of a larger, necessary professionalization process for graduate students (Gradin et al.). The Writing Hub at UC San Diego builds on these studies by exploring possibilities for formalized CoPs in graduate writing support that are: (1) facilitated by graduate writing consultants and (2) funded and logistically managed by administration. From our vantage point within this administrative space, these collaborations have consistently revealed how care-oriented writing support emerges through social reproductive labor, reciprocity, and the lived experiences of GWCs and student participants.

Embedded Tutoring

There is robust, and growing, interest in our field on embedded tutoring in institutions of higher education—however, much of the literature focuses upon undergraduate “course-embedded” tutoring models rather than graduate-level embedded tutoring. What scholarship we do have demonstrates that such programs are modeled on undergraduate course-embedded programs (Hallman). These programs take as their foundational ideal that embedded tutor programs “link students to specific writing-intensive courses, encourage partnerships between a Writing Fellow and a course professor, and promote collaboration between peers” (Hughes and Hall).

These outcomes resonate with our own embedded tutor pilot programs in the Sociology and Anthropology departments at UC San Diego. In these roles, GWCs are able to “unite... in powerful ways ideas of collaborative learning, peer education, [Writing Across the Curriculum], and faculty development” (Hughes and Hall). In our local context, these interventions are made possible through graduate student labor and investment of institutional resources. Such programs have a strong potential to increase Ph.D. completion pathways, enhance student preparation for the professoriate, and cultivate academic climates grounded in inclusion and equity.

Our first embedded tutor program began in Sociology during AY 2017–18. These partnerships situate writing support directly within students' home departments, enabling embedded GWCs to tailor services to disciplinary expectations. In 2021, after seeing the success of the Sociology model, Anthropology students petitioned their department for a similar collaboration. In both departments, we co-hired embedded GWCs who split their time (which has historically been 50% full-time equivalency, or 20 hours per week) equally between department-specific support and general Writing Hub programming. In their departments, they facilitated first-year writing workshops and consultations, guided students through disciplinary discourse practices, and collaborated closely with faculty to offer relevant programs that tailor writing services to disciplinary conventions in their fields.

Data from these pilot programs highlights the effectiveness—and vulnerability—of embedded GWC labor. Students consistently reported that working with a peer who understood the stakes of graduate writing contributed to both their academic confidence and sense of belonging. One participant noted how having the embedded tutor in their department helped “demystify some important (though often assumed) skills necessary to succeed in their field (Wright, “Embedded Programs”). Faculty, too, appreciated the value: one faculty member shared that embedded GWCs in their department “have been extremely valuable to our students and also reduced a lot of added work for the VCGS and staff.” Ultimately, information we’ve gathered from our pilot embedded tutor programs with Anthropology and Sociology departments suggest that interventions for graduate students, by graduate students can promote a sense of belonging and community, inform graduate students about characteristics of writing and genre that are germane to their discipline, and ultimately help graduate students find and feel sustained success in their programs.

Despite this, these programs remain among the first to be cut under times of austerity. Recently, we were informed by a department chair that our longest-running partnership will be ending next academic year due to budget constraints:

“I’m writing to let you know—regretfully—that Sociology will be unable to continue supporting the Writing Consultant position next year. Unfortunately, due to the deep budget cuts we are facing...we’ve had to make this difficult decision. It has been a real pleasure partnering with the Writing Hub, and I’m grateful for the support the Hub offered and the impact this embedded role has had over the years.”

This termination reflects a broader institutional logic that struggles to quantify the worth of embedded tutoring, especially when its benefits—like professional socialization, community-building, and emotional support—resist easy metrics. As our former embedded GWC in that department later reflected,

“At UCSD, many students (including myself) learn these aspects of the profession the hard way, through the types of difficult experiences that make you question whether you belong in the field. I think the Writing Consultant has an important role to play in being a gentler agent of professional socialization and supporting students when these difficult experiences happen.”

This graduate, department-embedded writing tutoring model, then, represents more than a partnership; it is an infrastructure—emotional, academic, and social—that supports graduate student development. Its precarity under institutional, statewide, and nationwide resource strains reveals that this care labor remains undervalued, even when its impacts are deeply felt. As writing centers and institutions grapple with sustaining equitable support for graduate students, these programs offer a potential model—but only if their contributions are recognized and resourced accordingly. The presence and protection of these “gentler agents” of professional socialization, to borrow our tutor’s language, is always a worthwhile investment.

Affinity Group Partnerships

In both our embedded tutoring partnerships and our standing collaborations with campus affinity spaces—namely, the Black Resource Center (BRC) and APIMEDA Programs and Services—these alternative models of service delivery emerged from GWC-led initiatives.

Rather than being launched through formal top-down planning, these partnerships took shape organically as GWCs recognized unmet needs within their own academic and cultural communities and began developing interventions to address them. For example, GWCs initiated collaborations with the BRC and APIMEDA Programs to offer writing groups, workshops, and other events designed specifically for students navigating graduate education at the intersection of identity. These efforts grew directly from consultants' own experiences and relationships within their communities, as well as their attunement to support structures that graduate students of color often lack.

These affinity-based collaborations align closely with recent scholarship emphasizing that graduate students often need support beyond one-on-one advising, especially given that many academic departments do not provide formal writing instruction. As a result, many students seek out resources from campus writing centers, where they can form their own systems of support and professional development. These writing spaces function as “third spaces” that support both writing and professional development (Brooks-Gillies et al.). Brooks-Gillies et al. also emphasize how “encouraging graduate students to discard the image of the struggling lone scholar and to take up practices that provide support and commiseration regarding the emotional struggles of graduate work... [is] just as important as direct writing instruction” (8). In this way, the goals and outcomes of these partnerships are not only supported by research but also central to students' academic belonging and professional development.

These smaller-scale, GWC-led partnerships do not require significant additional time or funding to sustain, yet their impact on our center's reach and reputation is notable. As Simpson reminds us, “systems theorists identify leverage points—places where small, strategic changes can potentially have ripple effects throughout the system” (104). These points of intervention are not “magical cures,” but rather “places where writing programs and university departments with few resources and personnel can focus their efforts to strengthen their educational systems” (104). The initiatives led by our GWCs reflect such leverage points: efforts that build trust with student populations historically underserved by institutional structures, and that invite students into communities of practice that recognize their identities, needs, and contributions.

Still, writing centers remain structurally precarious because they are vulnerable to institutional logics that prioritize numbers and immediate “impact.” The real measure of success, we argue, should be based on qualitative feedback and relationship-building, rather than by institutional expectations of quantitative data. After conversations with GWCs leading our BRC initiative, I've found myself wondering: “When the number of bodies in the room is the main metric by which we assess success, what does that look like when less than 5% of the student body at our institution is Black?” Despite consistently positive feedback from students, center staff, and consultants alike, these programs are often among the first to be cut in times of austerity.

The GWC who coordinated our BRC partnership, where all programming was and remains open to all UCSD graduate students, noted that the collaboration cultivated a cross-disciplinary community, lowered barriers to entry for students uncertain about working with the Writing Hub, and strengthened our center's presence across campus. At the same time, she observed that attendance can be low because of UCSD's already-small Black graduate student

population, and the sustainability of these partnerships is especially vulnerable to graduate consultant turnover. These observations point not only to the fragility of these programs under shifting resource conditions, but to the limitations of data-driven assessment models in capturing the relational, affective, and equity-based value of this work.

As our center faces further resource tightening, we hope to retain these partnerships, even if in more modest forms. One way we have adapted is by embedding partnership programming within our general services—for instance, hosting open workshops in campus partner spaces where students may already feel a sense of belonging and trust. Still, the future of this work remains uncertain. Like so many in higher education, we find ourselves waiting for information about next year’s funding, knowing that what we can sustain will depend less on what our programs make possible for students and more on what we can quantify.

Takeaways and Future Considerations

Realistically, we do not expect the structural conditions governing graduate labor to improve in the short term. The more graduate students and contingent staff “do more with less,” the more the institution perceives that these services can be sustained under ever-tighter constraints—potentially reducing institutional willingness to invest in, or even maintain, additional resources. At the same time, there is both power in, and a rich history of, collective action: graduate student organizers have long fought for improved labor conditions both nationally and on our own campus. How higher administration chooses to implement said change is often uneven and not universally popular, yet the university ultimately relies on this labor to keep essential functions running.

Given these realities, we advocate for practices that prioritize well-being and create spaces where people can flourish. While such strategies are not a cure-all, they offer a tangible way to resist the narratives that have long defined these spaces, providing immediate relief and fostering the relationships, trust, and care that make meaningful academic work possible. In all of the work we do, we strive to put people first by supporting professional development in deliberate, human-centered ways—what adrienne maree brown calls “moving at the speed of trust.” This principle guides how we cultivate relationships with our graduate writing consultants (GWCs) and with the graduate students we serve. It is also what sustains our work in the face of increasing uncertainty and institutional precarity.

As the conditions of labor in the academy grow more unstable, particularly for graduate student workers, we are called to reexamine the values and systems that shape higher education. By centering graduate contingent labor within our writing center and programming, we foreground a population often overlooked in institutional discourse, yet indispensable to the intellectual and emotional fabric of the university.

GWCs occupy a dual role: as students, they navigate structural vulnerabilities such as uncertain funding and expanding workloads; as writing mentors, they provide affective and intellectual labor central to our program’s success—building trust, fostering belonging, and supporting peers. This labor is foundational, yet it remains undervalued by institutional metrics that prioritize speed, quantifiability, and productivity over care and personal/professional growth. Our position outside traditional departments allows innovation, but also exposure, where rapid data collection and standardized assessment reflect the neoliberal logic that

devalues relational and developmental work. In response, we have sought small forms of resistance—such as integrating qualitative reflection into our reporting—to affirm the legitimacy of trust-based, community-building practices.

GWC-led initiatives—like embedded tutoring support and cross-campus collaborations—remain precarious not because they are ineffective, but because their impact resists quantification. Their marginalization—and the consequent marginalization of services, such as cross-campus collaborations, that contribute to their advancement—is exacerbated by institutional funding models that prioritize undergraduate education as a revenue stream, while positioning graduate students as a financial burden. In this logic, graduate students (outside of their contingent labor) are not viewed as institutional assets but as resource drains—a perception that undermines efforts to build robust, equity-minded support infrastructures for them. Graduate writing support services become vulnerable, their value questioned or quietly diminished. We must ask: *Does higher education still value the presence and development of its graduate students?* If the allocation of resources is any indication, the answer is far from reassuring.

One of our GWCs recently asked a question that continues to reverberate: What happens when the full weight of budgetary fear is projected onto this “bulwark” we have created for ourselves, onto the graduate labor that makes it all possible? This question encapsulates the high stakes of this moment. We may be tempted to retreat—into isolation, resignation, or reactive compliance—but we believe instead in recommitting to the principles that animate our work: growth, trust, community, and care.

Ultimately, we offer this article as a call to imagine a different future of labor in the academy—one that values graduate students not only as learners or laborers, but as essential members of a scholarly community where their labor is acknowledged *and* meaningfully supported. A future in which writing support is recognized not as a peripheral service, but as a vital site of professional and personal growth, coalition-building, and transformation for tutors and student visitors alike. And a future where the labor of care—often invisible, often feminized, often contingent—is understood not as supplemental, but as the very infrastructure of higher education.

Appendix

Table 1

UC San Diego Graduate Student Support, 2023-2024

Graduate student financial support								
<input type="radio"/> Per capita dollars <input checked="" type="radio"/> Total dollars		Campus San Diego	Program type Academic doctoral	CA residency All Students	Academic year 2023-24			
	Grand Total	Engr & Comp Sci	Arts	Humanities	Health Sciences	Life Sciences	Physical Sciences	Social Sciences
Full year equiv. enrollment (FYE)	3,701	1,221	122	160	11	781	693	424
FYE with any financial support	3,643	1,192	121	159	11	778	686	419
Fellowship/grant support								
UC scholarships	\$38,532,376	\$11,707,545	\$891,547	\$2,055,451	\$134,774	\$9,198,999	\$5,101,407	\$5,779,866
Federal scholarships	\$10,998,052	\$1,906,933	\$0	\$0	\$18,096	\$6,245,966	\$1,978,778	\$701,856
Other scholarships	\$2,594,320	\$1,115,813	\$148,700	\$165,007	\$20,440	\$712,869	\$176,662	\$189,857
Total scholarships	\$52,124,748	\$14,730,291	\$1,040,247	\$2,220,458	\$173,310	\$16,157,834	\$7,256,847	\$6,671,579

Link: <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/about-us/information-center/graduate-student-financial-support-and-debt-graduation>

Table 2

UC San Diego Food Security 2023, 2021

Background

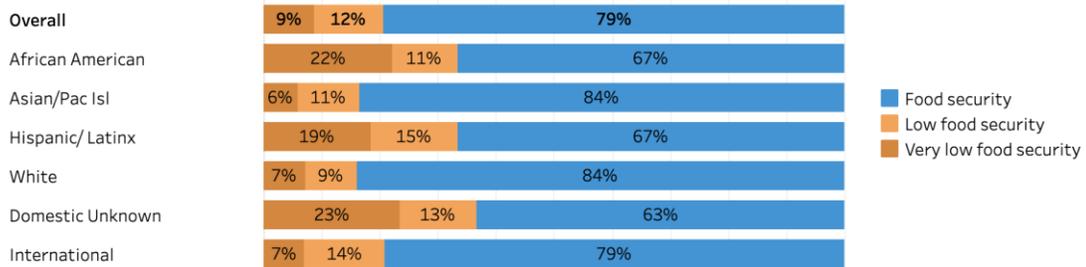
The University of California (UC) launched the Global Food Initiative (GFI) in 2014 to address how to sustainably and nutritiously feed a world population expected to reach 8 billion people by 2025. From the beginning, this goal has included a focus on food security among UC students. This dashboard provides information on basic needs and illustrates the relationship between food insecurity and/or homelessness to student learning, engagement, satisfaction, and outcomes. Data are from the 2016, 2018, 2020 and 2022 UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES), the 2016 Graduate Student Well-Being Survey (GSWBS), and the 2021 and 2023 UC Graduate Student Experience Survey (UCGSES).

Defining food insecurity and homelessness

Refer to the following description to see how UC measures food and housing insecurity: <https://www.ucop.edu/institutional-research-academic-planning/measuring-food-and-housing-insecurity.pdf>

Campus: San Diego | Survey year: 2021

Graduate level: (All) | Sexual orientation: (All) | Gender: (All) | Discipline: (All)

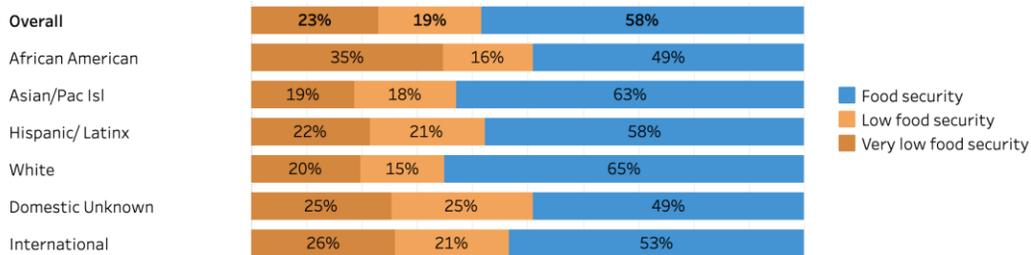


* Graduate student respondents are weighted to reflect the population (see background tab). Categories with group size fewer than 10 are hidden.

Graduate student food insecurity

Campus: San Diego | Survey year: 2023

Graduate level: (All) | Sexual orientation: (All) | Gender: (All) | Discipline: (All)



* Graduate student respondents are weighted to reflect the population (see background tab). Categories with group size fewer than 10 are hidden.

Link: <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/about-us/information-center/student-basic-needs>

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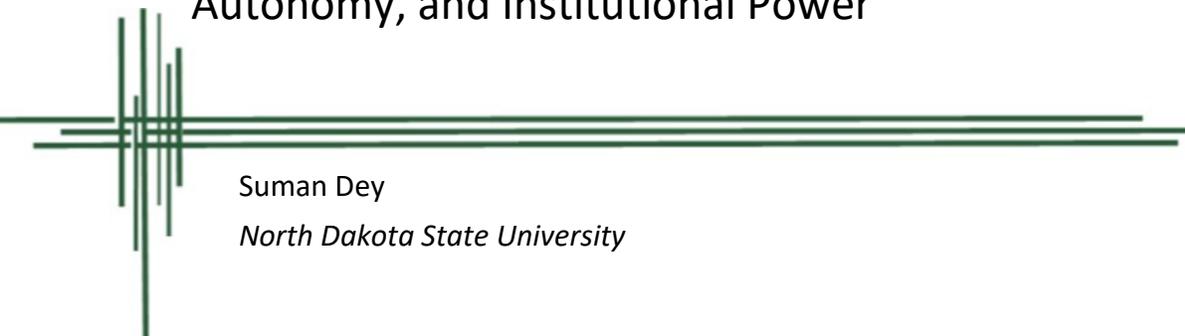
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AI and Graduate Teaching Labor: Reshaping Workload, Autonomy, and Institutional Power



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Abstract

The role of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) is shaped by a combination of instructional, administrative, and scholarly responsibilities, yet their labor often remains undervalued within higher education's institutional hierarchy. As artificial intelligence (AI) tools become increasingly integrated into university classrooms to assist with instructional design, writing support, and administrative organization, their impact on GTA labor calls for close examination. This study investigates how AI transforms instructional responsibilities, affects pedagogical autonomy, and reshapes labor expectations. Drawing on qualitative interviews with five GTAs from an English Department, including both domestic and international instructors, the research explores how AI intersects with linguistic diversity, institutional culture, and workload distribution. The findings indicate that while AI can aid some routine tasks, it often creates new forms of invisible labor such as prompt design, emotional management, and self-directed learning. Rather than reducing the burden, AI often intensifies it in implicit ways. This study contributes to ongoing conversations about academic labor by calling for AI policies that are transparent, equitable, and developed with meaningful input from educators.

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The integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education is not only a technological development but also a labor and governance issue with far-reaching consequences. As tools such as ChatGPT are introduced to assist with instructional design, support writing processes, and streamline administrative work, these changes unfold within a university system already marked by precarious employment and expanding managerial control. Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), who are underpaid, overburdened, and largely excluded from institutional decision-making, experience these changes with particular intensity. Adjunct faculty, who often teach multiple courses across different universities under similarly unstable conditions, face many of the same challenges, though this study focuses specifically on GTAs. From my perspective as a GTA, these tools are not neutral additions to teaching. On the surface, AI appears to promise efficiency and relief, but in practice it introduces new and often invisible tasks. Designing prompts, reshaping assignments, preparing lessons on ethical use, and monitoring how students interact with these systems take significant time and effort that rarely appear in workload expectations or compensation models. Far from reducing our responsibilities, AI may make teaching more mechanical, narrowing

pedagogical choices, and may subject our labor to new forms of surveillance and accountability. These pressures remind us that what is at stake is not just technology but the human and relational dimensions of teaching itself.

This article distinguishes between two discourses. The first is institutional and administrative, where AI is framed as a tool of efficiency, compliance, and innovation. The second is rooted in writing studies, where questions of pedagogy, authorship, and linguistic justice are central. This separation matters because what appears as progress in the language of administration often produces additional labor, surveillance, and constraint in the daily work of instructors. Generative AI is reorganizing GTA labor in three key ways: by expanding workload through new forms of invisible labor, by constraining autonomy through institutional expectations, and by reshaping governance through systems of surveillance and control. These effects are especially sharp for GTAs, who teach with significant responsibility but little authority. What is framed as time-saving technology often demands time for prompt design, ethical coaching, monitoring, and student guidance. Moreover, as Imran et al. explain, AI is most effective when aligned with constructivist learning principles such as scaffolding, metacognitive reflection, and conceptual change (36). These principles require careful human guidance, and this is work that AI itself cannot replace. Without recognition of that fact, GTAs are asked to carry out expanded pedagogical responsibilities without corresponding authority or support.

For clarity, I use the term AI use to refer to four categories: surveillance and monitoring, instructor tool use, AI-literacy instruction, and student use. Identifying AI practices through these categories avoids ambiguity and highlights the distinct pressures each creates for graduate instructors. Critical scholarship further underscores these dynamics. For example, De Roock shows how large language models enforce narrow conceptions of correct language that “marginalize the richness and validity of nonstandard linguistic practices” (595), and Vee cautions that institutional enthusiasm for new technologies often outpaces careful consideration of their long-term pedagogical and social consequences. Similarly, Press documents how administrators often impose AI without consultation, aiming to cut labor costs rather than improve learning (16-17). Taken together, these studies help explain why GTAs face expanded responsibilities, reduced autonomy, and intensified surveillance when AI enters higher education. Across this scholarship, AI emerges as a managerial, linguistic, and pedagogical intervention that redistributes labor onto instructors while constraining autonomy and care. Collectively, this scholarship foregrounds the stakes of linguistic justice and pedagogical care, showing that writing instruction is not only about efficiency but also about supporting students’ voices, identities, and intellectual growth.

This study is guided by three central questions: How does the use of AI influence the distribution of teaching responsibilities and the experience of instructional labor for GTAs? In what ways does it restrict or reconfigure their pedagogical autonomy, particularly in writing instruction? And what would it mean to integrate AI into higher education in ways that support graduate educators rather than deepen their precarious academic labor conditions? By situating these questions within both institutional and disciplinary discourses, this article argues that AI may expand GTA workload, constrain pedagogical autonomy, and reinforce precarity while also reproducing dominant linguistic norms. The findings point to the need for policies that

value linguistic justice, acknowledge invisible labor, and ensure that graduate educators have a meaningful role in shaping how AI enters classrooms.

Literature Review

Artificial intelligence in higher education does not enter a neutral landscape. It arrives entangled in histories of labor stratification, institutional governance, and systems of control. For Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), these dynamics are especially acute because their work has long been devalued within what is described by Rowland, on the basis of feminist composition scholarship, as a “feminized” status of labor in the discipline (1). Within this framework, such work is theorized as “care work” (1), a condition I refer to here as care labor. Rowland further describes GTA teaching as relational and emotional work that exceeds official contracts and remains largely invisible. Extending this analysis, Kirschenbaum and Raley argue that “the administrative and pedagogical burdens of reinvention” around AI fall disproportionately on instructors with the least institutional latitude, particularly those with heavy course loads and limited control over curricula (509–10). Imran et al. frame AI as enhancing pedagogical approaches and personalized learning, while also acknowledging implementation challenges and the necessity of teacher training and sustained professional development (35-36, 43-44). Beyond these expanded duties, AI introduces new forms of rhetorical labor, including prompt engineering. As Hart-Davidson et al. emphasize, prompting should be understood as an iterative, reflective, and ethically grounded literacy practice rather than a purely technical task. When prompt design is reduced to efficiency or output optimization, it risks functioning as the very kind of technological shortcut that Hart-Davidson et al. warn may come “at a human cost” (254). In instructional contexts, GTAs must therefore craft prompts that guide students toward critical engagement and rhetorical awareness rather than procedural compliance, a form of pedagogical and intellectual labor that requires time and expertise but remains largely unrecognized within official workload expectations. As Gupta and Shivers-McNair demonstrate, prompt writing emerges through commercially driven platforms and informal micro-literacy economies. Interpreted through the lens of academic labor, this emergence shifts pedagogical work into invisible domains that demand adaptation from contingent instructors without corresponding institutional recognition or support.

These structural demands also bring an emotional burden. GTAs are often pressured to present AI as progress even when they themselves feel undertrained or uncertain. Watermeyer et al. note that the rhetoric of efficiency frequently becomes a mandate to demands greater output without proportional support, and Kirschenbaum and Raley describe an atmosphere of amazement mixed with anxiety (504). GTAs must appear adaptable and technologically fluent while absorbing the strain of rapid institutional change, an affective dimension of academic labor that remains invisible but deeply shapes their teaching. Together, these workload pressures and emotional demands reveal how AI multiplies rather than simplifies academic labor, a condition that leaves little space for reflective and relational pedagogy and foreshadows future constraints on autonomy.

The politics of language exacerbate these pressures. The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) affirmed in its 1974 Students’ Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) resolution that linguistic authority is not inherent to any single American

dialect and that students retain the right to their own language varieties. Yet, nearly fifty years later, April Baker-Bell demonstrate how schools continue to reproduce what she terms “Anti-Black Linguistic Racism” (24). She argues that the devaluation of Black Language in classrooms mirrors the broader devaluation of Black lives, insisting that justice requires more than code-switching; it requires dismantling “White Mainstream English” (WME) as the invisible norm (18). In this sense, linguistic hierarchies and racial hierarchies are inseparable. For GTAs, many of whom teach multilingual and racially diverse students, AI systems that privilege standardized English reproduce the same exclusions that SRTOL and Baker-Bell critique. What is presented as neutral “correction” by AI models carries forward the erasure of marginalized voices and forces instructors to mediate between students’ lived languages and institutionalized norms.

Recent scholarship on AI in composition studies confirms these concerns. Drawing on Byrd’s analysis of linguistic punishment and De Roock’s critique of AI’s simulated authority, this scholarship frames large language models as reinforcing narrow standards of correctness that marginalize nonstandard expression. Laquintano and Vee add that multilingual writers often turn to AI because they know what kinds of English are rewarded institutionally, which places GTAs in the position of reasserting rhetorical agency where systems flatten difference (531). This body of research echoes Baker-Bell’s call to resist linguistic erasure. What she theorizes as linguistic violence in schools can be understood as extending into digital systems that normalize standardized English. Instead of liberating educators, AI creates new pedagogical constraints, reduces the space for affirming diverse voices, and shifts more responsibility onto instructors to humanize machine outputs.

Institutional structures further compound these pressures. Press argues that AI is rarely introduced through open dialogue; it is imposed from above as a mechanism of efficiency and cost-cutting (15-16). Labor responses to AI underscore these tensions. For example, during a graduate worker strike at Boston University, the administration suggested using ChatGPT to manage course responsibilities, a proposal strongly rejected by SEIU Local 509 (Press 15). The union emphasized that such measures undermine the relational and pedagogical labor GTAs perform. Bowman and Kovanen similarly argue that the rhetoric of “professionalization” often disguises unpaid labor, insisting instead that “graduate students are workers” whose teaching, grading, and mentoring must be recognized as central labor rather than supplementary training (2). These examples highlight that resistance to AI is inseparable from broader struggles over academic labor rights. Vee describes this as a form of “technical debt,” where institutions adopt technologies quickly without planning for long-term ethical and pedagogical consequences. Watermeyer et al. frame this condition of AI-mediated academic labor within the prestige economy of higher education, where metrics and digital surveillance regulate academic labor and reward visible productivity over relational pedagogy (447-49). These dynamics reflect what Burrows, cited in Woodcock, calls ‘quantified control,’ the convergence of metrics, markets, and surveillance to regulate academic labor (134). Within this framework, AI does not simply support instruction but embeds managerial logics that privilege speed, output, and compliance over reflective pedagogy. For GTAs, who already lack security and authority, quantified control intensifies their precarious status by reducing instructional autonomy and intensifying administrative surveillance. Even when AI is optional,

institutional culture makes its use in classroom instruction feel required and thereby compromises an instructor's pedagogical decision-making capacity. This is especially troubling in writing instruction, where responsiveness, reflection, and linguistic diversity—all issues which depend on the choices of instructors—are central to meaningful learning.

In response to these vulnerable teaching conditions, critical voices within writing studies have begun to resist the normalization of AI. McIntyre, Fernandes, and Sano-Franchini argue in “Refusing Generative AI in Writing Studies” that adopting AI without carefully critiquing its place in the classroom undermines pedagogical commitments to equity and justice, particularly when instructors are pressured to comply with university/administrative expectations. Their position aligns with Baker-Bell's call for antiracist language pedagogy that affirms students' voices, a commitment that stands in tension with efficiency-driven approaches to AI adoption. Taken as a whole, this scholarship reveals a concerning contradiction: while institutions frame AI as progress, its use often reinscribes linguistic inequality and expands invisible labor. This review therefore establishes the stakes of my study: to show how GTAs, positioned at the margins of authority yet at the center of classroom practice, experience AI as both a pedagogical burden and a site where linguistic justice is urgently at risk.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study employs a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach (Charmaz) to examine how Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) experience the integration of generative AI in writing instruction. CGT emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant and situates knowledge within broader institutional and cultural contexts. This framework is appropriate for capturing the complexity of GTA labor, pedagogy, and autonomy in an era of technological change. As previously mentioned, three interrelated themes guide this study: (1) how AI influences GTA workload, (2) how it reshapes instructional autonomy, and (3) how it restructures institutional governance and surveillance. These questions provide an analytic lens but are not imposed on participant perspectives; instead, they develop dialogue with the data through iterative coding and memo writing.

Participants and Data Collection

The study received IRB approval (Protocol #IRB0005567) and followed all ethical guidelines. Five Graduate Teaching Assistants participated: Jainab, Ali, and Penelope from Bangladesh, Frances from the United States, and Kwame from Ghana. All were teaching writing-intensive courses at a public university in the Upper Midwest, and their varied national and linguistic backgrounds offered valuable perspectives on how AI intersects with labor precarity across cultural and institutional contexts. Recruitment relied on purposeful sampling through professional and departmental networks to identify participants who had direct experience teaching with or around AI in writing courses. Each participant provided informed consent, selected a pseudonym, and retained the right to withdraw at any point.

Interviews took place in person and were recorded through Zoom to ensure accuracy. Each session lasted between thirty and sixty minutes and focused on teaching responsibilities, experiences with AI, and perceptions of institutional pressures. Transcripts were first generated using Zoom's automated transcription feature. Short, de-identified excerpts were then uploaded to ChatGPT to refine punctuation and formatting. Personal identifiers and pseudonyms were excluded at every stage to preserve confidentiality and maintain anonymity. All transcripts manually reviewed and corrected to maintain both accuracy and fidelity to participant perspectives. Participants were fully informed about the transcription and editing process, given the option to decline the use of AI-assisted refinement, and assured that all data were securely stored with all identifying details removed.

The decision to use ChatGPT for limited transcript refinement reflected reflexive awareness rather than convenience. The transcripts were originally generated by Zoom's automated feature. When uploading transcript excerpts to ChatGPT, it was not indicated that the text came from research interviews to protect participant privacy. All files were divided into short, de-identified segments and stored on an encrypted drive to prevent data exposure. This methodological choice reflected the study's central theme: Graduate Teaching Assistants, like the researcher, often operate in institutional systems where AI use appears necessary but not fully voluntary. The inclusion of AI in this limited role became part of the analytic framework, showing how technological dependence and restricted agency influence academic labor. The study also recognized broader ethical concerns associated with AI, including surveillance, data retention, and environmental cost, while maintaining a commitment to care, consent, and transparency throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the systematic stages of Constructivist Grounded Theory. Each transcript was first divided into meaningful segments and coded in the participants' own words to preserve their perspectives. These initial or open codes reflected concrete experiences such as emotional labor, invisible work, prompt pedagogy, and AI-literacy instruction. In the next stage, focused coding grouped the most frequent and significant codes into broader categories such as expanded workload, soft mandate, and linguistic erasure. Axial coding was used to analyze the relationships among these categories to identify causal conditions, contextual influences, and consequences.

Throughout this process, analytic memos documented emerging insights and supported the transition from descriptive accounts to interpretive frameworks. After initial coding, I also wrote brief participant-level thematic summaries that synthesized recurring patterns across each interview and anchored them in representative excerpts to support cross-case comparison and reflexive analysis. These summaries were reviewed against the complete data to ensure accuracy and preserve participants' voices. Table 1 illustrates how open codes evolved into broader themes aligned with the four analytic buckets: surveillance and monitoring, instructor tool use, AI-literacy instruction, and student use.

Table 1. Coding Progression from Open to Axial Themes

Open Codes (in participants' words)	Focused Categories	Axial Themes	Analytic Buckets
"I spend more time writing AI prompts than grading papers" (Ali)	Prompt pedagogy as invisible work	Expanded Workload	Instructor Tool Use
"Students expect me to teach them how to use ChatGPT, but that was never in my contract." (Penelope)	AI-literacy instruction without recognition	Expanded Workload	AI-Literacy Instruction
"It feels like I am watched through the LMS logs." (Kwame)	Soft surveillance in digital platforms	Surveillance and Monitoring	Surveillance/Monitoring
"If I don't use AI in at least one lesson, it looks like I'm not innovative." (Frances)	Soft mandate to adopt AI	Constrained Autonomy	Instructor Tool Use
"My students' voices disappear when AI rewrites their drafts." (Jainab)	Erasure of linguistic diversity	Linguistic Justice & Identity	Student Use
"We don't have a choice; policies are made without us." (Kwame)	Lack of GTA consultation in decision-making	Institutional control and governance	Governance
"I felt anxious presenting AI as progress when I myself was unsure." (Penelope)	Emotional burden of technological change	Invisible Affective Labor	Instructor Tool Use

Researcher Positionality

I write as a Graduate Teaching Assistant in first-year writing in an English Department at a public university in the Upper Midwest, positioned both as an insider and as a critical observer of the labor conditions this study explores. I design assignments, lead discussions, and work within the same institutional structures and expectations that shape participants' experiences. This professional and disciplinary proximity offers insight into the lived realities of GTA labor while requiring continuous self-reflexivity so that my own perspective does not overshadow participants' voices. My dual role as instructor and graduate student informs how I interpret the institutional and cultural dimensions of AI integration. While administrator discourse across the university celebrates AI as a modern and efficient tool, graduate students and faculty in our English Department approach it as an object of study for rhetorical inquiry and ethical reflection. University administration encouraged me to include at least one class session discussing AI and its ethical implications for student writing, rather than requiring direct tool use, an invitation that functioned as an expectation rather than a choice. This situation parallels

what participants described: an ostensible discourse of autonomy accompanied by subtle and implicit institutional pressure to incorporate it into our classroom instruction. It also reflects a broader divide between administrative priorities that emphasize efficiency and departmental values that center authorship, linguistic justice, and reflective pedagogy.

In my own teaching, I have seen how AI compounds labor in ways that are seldom recognized or compensated. Integrating AI responsibly requires sustained intellectual work, emotional care, and careful pedagogical judgment. The challenge lies not only in learning to use AI but also in translating its presence into ethical classroom practice that demands ongoing judgement, explanation, and care. Students increasingly bring AI-generated texts into their writing, which calls for guidance on authorship, transparency, and critical awareness. Responding to these realities demands time and reflection that rarely appear in official workload models. I also encounter the broader structures of digital oversight that accompany technological adoption: learning management systems that record every instructional action and metrics that represent teaching through data rather than human interaction. These mechanisms alter how I understand accountability and professional agency and create a sense of visibility that shapes both pedagogical decisions and emotional labor.

Although AI may provide limited support for drafting or organization, I treat it cautiously and never rely on it for evaluative feedback. My approach to responding to student writing centers on attentiveness to multilingual expression and on affirming students' rights to their own language. This orientation guides both my pedagogy and my interpretation of participants' accounts. Throughout the study, I used memo writing and peer debriefing to maintain analytic distance while recognizing that my own standpoint provides important context. When my perspective appears in the Results, it functions to situate the analysis within lived institutional conditions rather than to present additional data. This reflexive stance clarifies how GTAs experience AI as a condition of expanded labor, constrained autonomy, and redefined pedagogical care.

Results

AI Training as Personal Responsibility (AI-Literacy Instruction)

Across all five interviews, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) described learning to use artificial intelligence as a self-driven effort rather than an organized institutional process. Workshops were brief introductions and often optional. Frances explained that she received some training but that "AI literacy really develops through self-education," which for Frances involved hours of independent practice and experimentation. Penelope observed that "no training makes you perfect," since the rapid evolution of tools demands continuous adjustment. Jainab, who had attended a graduate seminar on AI and pedagogy, noted that such opportunities were rare and that teachers "must train themselves before talking about AI with students." Ali and Kwame both viewed AI knowledge as a moral responsibility that supports ethical teaching rather than a compliance task. Kwame also added that the belief that AI saves time reflects a misunderstanding because responsible use requires reflection and careful evaluation.

Participants also recognized that AI-literacy instruction has become part of their workload even though it appears nowhere in official policy. They guide students on rhetorical and ethical dimensions of AI use, yet institutional support is minimal. Frances summarized this situation clearly: “We are the ones figuring it out first, and then maybe it becomes policy later.” This gap between institutional enthusiasm for innovation and the lack of concrete guidance positioned GTAs as first responders to technological change, responsible for developing pedagogical expertise that leadership later adopts as policy.

Prompt Pedagogy as Everyday Teaching Tool (Instructor Tool Use)

Prompt creation emerged as the most time-consuming and conceptually demanding element of teaching with AI. Participants treated prompts not as technical commands but as pedagogical tools that shape rhetorical thinking. Frances said she wrote prompts “not just to get better answers from the tool but to help students think critically about their questions.” Penelope added that when students compose their own prompts, they “slow down and really consider what they want,” which improves metacognitive awareness. Jainab observed that collaborative learning patterns shifted because students often arrived with AI-generated material instead of collectively produced ideas, which forced her to redesign group discussions to restore interaction. Kwame emphasized that “prompt engineering is the key,” since the quality of engagement depends on the student’s clarity and ethical awareness. Ali explained that the creative process still belongs to the human writer, and the teacher’s role is to help students use AI as a supplement to reasoning rather than a substitute for it.

My own classroom experience reflected similar challenges. I use group discussions to help students examine how prompts shape voice, agency, and bias. Students write their own discussion prompts and analyze how AI interprets them. This process slows their thinking and encourages rhetorical precision. It also requires extensive preparation time and emotional presence. Each prompt I design must be tested, adjusted, and contextualized for diverse student backgrounds. Like the GTAs I interviewed, I find that prompt pedagogy demands the same intellectual care as traditional writing instruction but receives little recognition in workload or evaluation.

Hidden Work and Emotional Strain (Expanded Workload)

Participants consistently reported that AI increased rather than reduced their workload in this setting. They revised syllabi, redesigned assignments, tested tools, and monitored student use without compensation or acknowledgement. Frances said that “every time we teach, we should revise our course,” a task that required continuous intellectual effort. Kwame noted that “using AI means rethinking classroom materials and peer strategies; it is not less work, only different work that goes unseen.” Penelope recalled an anxious summer spent testing AI outputs to check fairness in feedback.

Several GTAs experimented with AI-assisted feedback but clarified that the decision was personal, not institutional. Ali explained that he tested AI only to explore time-saving possibilities but later rephrased all generated comments so that “students do not feel dismissed.” I share a similar position. I never delegate final feedback to AI. I have tested AI for phrasing short formative notes, rewritten every suggestion, and removed wording that

suppressed student voice. The experience confirmed that AI cannot replace the relational and rhetorical judgment that feedback requires. This process demands attention to multilingual expression and to students' linguistic agency. Collectively, such experiments illustrate how AI integration extends emotional and interpretive labor while remaining invisible in institutional metrics.

Autonomy with Expectations (Institutional vs Departmental Influence)

Participants stated that they had freedom to decide how to use AI, but many experienced indirect pressure to include it in their classes. This pressure emerged from two distinct sources. At the institutional level, leaders framed AI adoption as innovation and modernization. At the departmental level, writing program administrators emphasized critical literacy and rhetorical responsibility when using AI. Frances explained that she incorporated AI because "departmental guidance encouraged us to discuss it with students." Ali said that "no one forced us, but it seemed safer to include it." Jainab confirmed that instructors were encouraged rather than required, though the suggestion did not feel optional. Penelope described an ethical motivation: "AI is already part of students' reality."

My own experience mirrors this pattern. I received a message requesting that every section of first-year writing include at least one lesson on AI. Although the directive was framed as a recommendation, declining felt professionally risky. The difference between institutional enthusiasm and departmental caution captures how formal autonomy exists alongside cultural pressure. AI thus becomes a soft mandate: a marker of professional responsibility that instructors must perform even when official policy is silent.

Invisible Oversight (Surveillance and Monitoring)

GTAs reported that while their teaching was seldom observed in person, they remained aware of continuous digital visibility. Frances said she had not been observed in four years but still feared that a student complaint could lead to administrative scrutiny. Kwame explained that Blackboard records every instructional action and "even if submissions are anonymous, the system knows who uploaded what." Penelope noted that once digital systems became integral to teaching, instructors were informed about built-in monitoring features. Ali admitted that he felt cautious whenever uploading lesson plans or announcements. Participants described this condition as ambient surveillance where data tracking replaces human evaluation. For many, this sense of oversight restricted pedagogical experimentation. In my own teaching, I feel compelled to check analytics to confirm compliance and to avoid misunderstandings. This climate of visibility influences not only how GTAs teach but also how they understand professional accountability. Surveillance thus functions less as explicit supervision and more as a structural condition that shapes behavior.

Language, Voice, and Ideological Constraints (Student Use)

AI tools often reinforced standardized English norms that can erase linguistic diversity. Jainab observed that "students' voices disappear when AI rewrites their drafts." Similarly, Frances found that AI flattened tone and emotion, and Kwame explained that multilingual students' intentions are often altered when the tool standardizes their phrasing, leading to confusion

about authorship. Some students lose confidence after repeated corrections that make their writing sound less like their own.

These experiences reflect broader ideological constraints. GTAs tried to protect students' linguistic agency but often had to spend extra time mediating between institutional expectations of correctness and the desire to preserve individual voice. In my teaching, I discuss these tensions openly through group activities that compare human and AI revisions of the same text. Students then analyze what disappears or changes when AI edits their writing. Such exercises demonstrate that linguistic justice is not an abstract principle but daily classroom practice that requires careful rhetorical negotiation.

The Rhetoric of Replaceability (Institutional Control)

All participants expressed unease about institutional narratives suggesting that AI might replace instructors. Frances questioned whether evidence supports such claims, while Jainab insisted that “you cannot be replaced by a machine.” Ali said the issue lies “not in AI itself but in the humans who use it wrongly.” Kwame warned that when GTAs demand fair treatment, they risk hearing that “AI can do the teaching.” Participants recognized these statements as rhetorical strategies rather than realistic predictions. They saw the discourse of replaceability as a managerial tool that devalues human expertise and undermines morale.

GTAs defined their work through empathy, ethical care, and contextual understanding, qualities they believed machines could not reproduce. For them, teaching is an act of judgment and relationship, not an algorithmic process. AI therefore serves as a mirror for labor politics in higher education, revealing how institutions value efficiency over pedagogy and how contingent instructors resist attempts to frame their work as replaceable.

Discussion

AI Expands Labor Rather Than Reduces It (Instructor Tool Use and AI Literacy Instruction)

The results show that AI adds work to the lives of GTAs rather than reducing it. Participants spent extra hours learning to use AI tools, revising syllabi, and monitoring student practices. What universities often describe as efficiency becomes a transfer of invisible labor. GTAs perform technical, emotional, and rhetorical work that remains absent from workload calculations. Participants described assignment revision, tool testing, and feedback adaptation as time-intensive forms of labor that required sustained intellectual and emotional effort. These experiences highlight how AI integration introduces affective demands alongside technical work, intensifying teaching labor rather than alleviating it. This pattern reflects what scholars of academic labor identify as the feminization and invisibility of care work in higher education (Rowland; Kirschenbaum and Raely). Tasks such as mentoring, checking tone, and guiding ethical use are essential to student success but receive little recognition. AI does not automate this labor; it relocates it into less visible domains. The instructor's role becomes that of mediator who translates institutional enthusiasm for technology into the lived realities of teaching. As Rowland and Kirschenbaum observe, such labor remains central to pedagogy but peripheral in university discourse. My own experience confirms this. Teaching with AI

requires longer preparation, emotional attentiveness, and reflection that intensify workload without acknowledgment.

Autonomy Within Soft Mandates (Institutional vs Departmental Expectations)

While GTAs retained technical autonomy in how they used AI, their decisions reflected competing discourses. Institutional leaders equated AI adoption with innovation and modernization. Writing program administrators emphasized critical literacy, authorship, and student care. Frances and Ali both explained that departmental encouragement to discuss AI with students felt more like an expectation than an option. This informal requirement, or soft mandate, demonstrates how power operates through expectation rather than formal policy and frames AI adoption as a marker of professional responsibility even in the absence of explicit enforcement. The distinction between institutional and departmental pressures clarifies how autonomy becomes conditional. Institutional rhetoric values technological participation as a sign of professionalism, while disciplinary discourse calls for critique and reflection. GTAs stood between these positions and translated managerial expectations into classroom practice. Declining to use AI appeared professionally risky, even when not mandated. This layered expectation turns innovation into obligation. Participant accounts reveal that autonomy in name can coexist with constraint in practice, a dynamic that mirrors managerial patterns across higher education.

Surveillance, Oversight, and the Politics of Data (Surveillance and Monitoring)

Although participants were seldom observed directly, they experienced continuous digital oversight. Blackboard and other management systems recorded every instructional action, creating what Frances described as a quiet sense of being watched. This atmosphere appears to alter how instructors plan lessons, communicate with students, and evaluate their performance. Kwame's remarks about anonymous data still being traceable illustrate how these systems convert teaching into measurable output.

This finding supports Woodcock's concept of quantified control, where educational labor is monitored through metrics rather than human judgment (134). For GTAs, especially international instructors, visibility intersects with vulnerability. The fear of misinterpretation or discipline encourages caution and self-censorship. Even without explicit monitoring, the infrastructure of surveillance produces compliance. AI technologies strengthen this effect because they depend on data extraction and record keeping. What begins as instructional support becomes a tool of governance. The university's investment in AI therefore signals not only technological progress but also administrative power.

Language, Voice, and Pedagogical Care (Student Use and Instructor Tool Use)

Participants consistently described AI systems as reinforcing existing linguistic hierarchies. Across cases, instructors noted that AI-mediated revisions often diminished voice, flattened tone, and altered rhetorical intention, particularly for multilingual writers. These patterns align with arguments that linguistic racism operates through the privileging of a single standardized English, rendering other forms of expression less visible or less legitimate (Baker-Bell).

For GTAs, linguistic justice functions as a daily responsibility rather than a theoretical goal. They work to preserve students' identities while meeting institutional expectations of academic discourse. My own classroom practice parallels theirs. Through group discussions, I ask students to compare AI-edited and self-revised drafts to see what meaning changes. This practice restores agency and invites reflection on rhetorical difference. Such pedagogy requires time, patience, and careful interpretation. AI therefore multiplies rather than replaces the human effort necessary to sustain inclusive instruction. It turns the teacher into both linguistic advocate and ethical interpreter, roles that institutions rarely acknowledge but that sustain equity in education.

The Rhetoric of Replaceability (Institutional Control and Labor Politics)

Across interviews, GTAs rejected the claim that AI could replace instructors, yet they recognized how such arguments circulate as managerial rhetoric. Participants expressed skepticism about the evidence behind these assertions and emphasized that effective instruction depends on empathy, contextual judgment, and relational awareness that automated systems cannot reproduce. Participants also interpreted narratives of replaceability as mechanisms of institutional control that discourage collective demands for fair treatment. In this sense, claims that AI can perform teaching function less as descriptions of reality and more as discursive moves that reinforce compliance and limit critique.

Framed this way, the rhetoric of replaceability aligns with what Watermeyer et al. describe as an ideology of efficiency, where “productive efficiency” becomes a dominant justification for intensified academic work (446). By positioning AI as both assistant and potential replacement, institutions preserve flexibility while avoiding accountability. GTAs understand this contradiction. They know that effective teaching depends on emotional intelligence, rhetorical awareness, and cultural sensitivity, qualities that learning language models are unable to reproduce. Their resistance reframes AI as a site of ethical conflict where human values challenge institutional priorities.

Institutional Support and Policy Implications (Across All Four Buckets)

The interviews show that current institutional frameworks fail to support AI integration ethically or equitably. GTAs learn, adapt, and instruct without compensation, guidance, or recognition. AI literacy and prompt pedagogy now represent substantial labor that remains outside workload policy. At the same time, surveillance technologies expand without transparent oversight. These structural conditions call for institutional reform.

Universities must acknowledge AI-related tasks as legitimate academic labor. Training programs should be paid, sustained, and collaboratively developed. Departments should clarify expectations so that ethical instruction does not rely on individual initiative. Policies must distinguish between AI use that enriches learning and AI use that enforces compliance. Above all, administrators should recognize refusal, the choice not to use AI, as a valid pedagogical decision rather than a rejection of innovation.

Toward an Ethic of Care in AI Pedagogy

The findings show that teaching with AI represents not a technical modification but an ethical and relational transformation. Every stage of the process, including prompt design, student guidance, feedback, and the navigation of surveillance, requires attentiveness and care. When GTAs integrate AI with thoughtfulness, they act as cultural translators who balance institutional demands with students' diverse realities. Yet this care remains invisible within institutional discourse that privileges productivity over pedagogy.

An ethic of care redefines AI not as a substitute for human effort but as a catalyst for reflection on what meaningful teaching requires. It centers empathy, transparency, and voice rather than efficiency. Recognizing this ethic within AI pedagogy means valuing relational labor as essential to education. For GTAs, whose work exists at the intersection of technology and precarity, such recognition would affirm their expertise and preserve the human core of writing instruction.

Conclusion: Toward Ethical and Equitable AI Pedagogy

This study suggests that artificial intelligence expands rather than reduces the work of Graduate Teaching Assistants. It adds new responsibilities such as prompt design, ethical instruction, emotional care, and digital monitoring, which remain invisible in institutional workload calculations. The findings show that AI reshapes teaching through four distinct areas: instructor tool use, AI-literacy instruction, surveillance and monitoring, and student use. Across these areas, participants described how autonomy appears intact but is complicated by subtle institutional and departmental pressures. Institutional leaders promote AI as evidence of innovation, while Writing Program administrators frame it as a subject of rhetorical awareness and student care. This difference reveals that formal freedom can coexist with implicit obligation. The pressure to adopt AI often arises from institutional narratives of modernization rather than disciplinary commitments to pedagogy.

Moving from critique to action, this study calls for clear and humane policy. Universities must recognize AI-related preparation, prompt design, and ethical guidance as legitimate academic labor. Departments should create paid and ongoing training that includes the right to decline AI use when it conflicts with pedagogical purpose. Transparent surveillance policies are essential so that data tracking does not silence instructor agency. Writing programs should revise rubrics to value authorship, linguistic diversity, and student voice instead of machine-like correctness. For GTAs, workload credit and mentoring structures should reflect the expanded demands of AI-mediated teaching. Though this study was limited to five participants at one institution, its insights apply broadly to writing programs where graduate educators balance responsibility with limited authority. Ethical attention to data security and energy use must remain central as higher education negotiates AI integration. Recognizing these human costs is the first step toward building an AI pedagogy grounded in care, transparency, and justice rather than efficiency alone.

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An Issue of Citational Politics: Elevating the Academic Labor
in Community-Engaged Projects



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Abstract

While universities and colleges encounter new challenges to the sociopolitical climate influencing higher education, many institutions have embraced “community engagement” as a response to the growing public skepticism surrounding higher education. This article responds to this current moment by discussing the invisible labor that occurs in community-engaged scholarship. Many scholars across disciplines have already written about the challenge of accounting for community-engaged practices within review, tenure, and promotion (RTP) materials. Despite efforts to address these challenges, misalignment remains between the institution’s claim to value community-engaged scholarship and their documentation practices that attempt to reward community-engaged labor via RTP. I argue that this misalignment is an effect of the invisible labor guiding a community-engaged scholar’s ethical practice as they develop community relationships outside of the institution. In this chapter, I discuss this invisible labor through a relational ecology framework and offer examples from my own community-engaged scholarship to surface the invisible moments of community-engaged labor. I find that the invisible labor of community engagement is an issue of citational politics, or what gets “counted” in RTP at universities and colleges. As a response, I urge scholars to reflect on their citational practices and cite non-academic genres to better amplify the invisible labor of community engagement.

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Recent events ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic, campus protests, the arrests of international student visa holders, the cancellation of federally funded research grants, the presence of ICE on college campuses, and pressures for institutions to “make a deal” with the Trump 2.0 administration have drastically pushed higher education into new, and arguably chaotic, dilemmas. While today’s sociopolitical climate has contributed to anxieties for those working in higher education, these times are also reflective of growing

public skepticism about the role, purpose, and necessity of higher education. Evidence of the public's waning value of higher education surfaces in a July of 2024 [Gallop](#) poll. The poll finds that the noted decline of public support for higher education can be traced to a combination of factors including the rise of college tuition, concerns about the value of a degree, the perception of workforce needs as misaligned with higher education's training, and the general politicization of higher education (Jones). In response, some institutions have sought to restore confidence in higher education "with a focus on transparency, accountability, and community engagement" (Clark et al.). This community-centered approach has been marketed by some universities as adopting a "third mission", which calls for university administrators and faculty to imagine their purpose as social leaders investing university resources and time into the broader (not just academic) community.

Similar appeals to align scholarship with more "public facing" or community-centered commitments have also been adopted at a departmental level. English Departments including the University of Wyoming and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee have created recent graduate programs grounded in community engagement.³⁰ The Conference on Community Writing, and its close association with the Coalition of Community Writing, demonstrates another shift by which disciplines are embracing community-engaged work. Collectively, these examples illustrate the range of ways institutions, departments, and disciplines are embracing the inclusion of communities in academia. This academic shift towards communities can generate excitement and new ways to imagine an institution's purpose. Arguably, finding excitement and new ways to imagine our work matters perhaps more than ever before given the sociopolitical climate and the defunding of higher education. For myself, I continue to find purpose in community-engaged work at my institution and can attest first-hand how community engagement can produce both public good and good for the institution. Both can be true. But, for good to flourish, structural revisions must occur to address the unique labor conditions of community-engaged work.

One overt labor issue is how institutions reward community engagement; often described as a practice that "measures," "recognizes," and thus "counts" community-engaged labor during academic merit reviews and tenure and promotion cases. Universities claiming to value community engagement have more recently begun to understand that the realities of community-engaged scholarship simply do not align with more traditional academic metrics of tenure and promotion. One suggested approach to address this misalignment has been the strategic inclusion of more ambiguous language in university merit review and promotion policies to allow for a more "open" interpretation of community engagement's labor (Janke et al. 30). However, closer examination to assess the impact of these policies found that the decision to adopt a broader, more blanket approach to revising tenure and promotion language increased and muddled — rather than decreased and clarified— the labor of evaluating tenure and promotion cases (Janke et al. 42). Rather than create documents that

³⁰ See the University of Wyoming's "English PhD in the Public Humanities" degree and UW-Milwaukee's "Public Rhetorics and Community Engagement" program.

clearly reaffirm and define the labor of community engagement, the ambiguous language reduced the clarity to guide evaluations because “faculty held different views about the key elements that distinguish community-engaged scholarship as an aspect of scholarly work” (Janke et al. 39). As a result, the inclusion of ambiguous language within university review, tenure, and promotion (RTP) policies can produce “additional work” at the college and departmental level; effectively increasing the labor of faculty serving on academic reviews and tenure and promotion committees by requiring them to reconcile the ambiguous language in university policies with more specific college, departmental, and/or disciplinary values of community engagement (Janke et al. 39). In effect, the unclear language of these policies created unintended obstacles thwarting the institution’s intention to more explicitly embrace community engagement.

For faculty serving on tenure and promotion committees, the task of conducting academic reviews and evaluating promotion files for community-engaged scholar invites a host of new questions. Adding to the confusion is the unfortunate reality that many of the metrics of community-engaged scholarship frequently do not typically align with the metrics of more traditional academic research and teaching. Laura Wendling elaborates on the reasoning behind this misalignment, writing:

community-engaged research often operates in historically nontraditional ways, in that it includes community members as coresearchers, seeks to produce additional scholarly products outside peer-reviewed publications, and often favors local impact over national recognition, [as such] it cannot be evaluated in the same ways as traditional research. (222)

Wendling details how the required labor of community-engaged scholarship fails to align with more traditional approaches to academic scholarship. As a result, it can be a challenge for how universities understand, acknowledge, value, and reward more non-traditional forms of academic labor. Part of the challenge to adequately evaluating community-engaged work is the fact that many merit and promotion “policies often do not specify metrics and products aimed at public audiences” (Janet et al. 41). In turn, the labor conditions of rewarding community-engaged work disproportionately require faculty members— those who are both going up for promotion and being asked to serve as RTP reviewers—to engage in more nebulous labor of arguing how work typically invisible to university promotion policies matters and should count towards promotions.

Institutional change is slow, and, as such, can take time to adequately address this misalignment of evaluating community-engaged labor within the university. In response, community-engaged scholars have encouraged interventional approaches to address the labor conditions which often reward faculty “for publishing traditional research outputs” rather than “truly promoting public scholarship” (Alperin et al. 19). For institutions “to better align public scholarship goals with the metrics and RPT [review, promotion, and tenure] processes that guides faculty work” (Alperin et al. 19), scholars suggest that interventions could begin to manifest at a disciplinary-level rather than at the broader institutional point-of-view (Janke et al. 44). To be certain, localizing how we “count” community engagement via RTP via a more localized, disciplinary scope places the task of arguing for the value of that non-traditional scholarship once again upon faculty, rather, than demand a larger institutional restructuring of RTP policies. Nonetheless, it should be noted that some disciplines have found some success

in drawing upon disciplinary arguments for community engagement across institutional contexts.

Take, for instance, the discipline of writing, rhetoric, and literacy studies, which has found some success in advocating for the value of community-engaged work and the realities of the labor required of community-engaged work. Scholars trained in this discipline incorporate the topics of rhetoric, writing, and literacy with a host of community issues. New sub-disciplines such as prison literacies, cultural rhetorics, and community writing projects offer unique insights that center community perspectives, knowledges, and methods. To be sure, these sub-disciplines exist because of how communities are centered in our work, whether that work includes our teaching, research, or service. In general, the reception towards actively incorporating communities as central to our disciplinary identity has been well-received, evident by the creation of new community engagement degree programs within English Departments. In fact, it can be argued that the intentional incorporation of communities into our disciplinary practices has pushed the discipline to adopt more critical and social justice orientations to guide the ethics of this work; one example is the [CCCC Statement on Community-Engaged Scholarship and Pedagogy in Rhetoric and Composition](#). Position statements like this one are invaluable tools for community-engaged scholars because the statements can serve as a form of guidance translating how the discipline understands and recognizes this work for our other colleagues responsible for evaluating the credibility and “rigor” of our work. These disciplinary statements can be of particular use when advocating for community-engaged work to be counted by universities and colleges as they address the slow, relationship-building (and invisible) labor of cultivating trust with communities. Furthermore, these statements describe how to understand the value of community-engaged work as a discipline; and thus, can reduce the labor of other faculty evaluators working across other disciplines as they review promotion materials that may not resemble their traditional deliverables of knowledge-making.

While I find my discipline to be an exemplar of how to advocate and produce useful resources for community-engaged scholars, what remains missing are anecdotes of how scholars use those resources to account for the community-engaged labor, often invisible to their institutions. More attention to *how* and *who* is often doing community-engaged scholar is needed in order to offer more transparent models of how to sustain (and receive promotions) based on the merits of our community-engaged labor across institutions. Following the racial unrest of 2020 and struggles of the pandemic, the University of Michigan conducted a study to examine how these sociopolitical moments were impacting community-engaged work. The report, titled [“Faculty Equity & COVID-19: The Problem, The Evidence, and Recommendations”](#), found that while there was a general appetite to actively engage in developing community relationships and projects that connected students and research with issues of racial justice and health equity, many leading these efforts on campus identified as women and faculty of color. Noting this finding, the report urged university leaders to create mechanisms for making what they called *invisible* service work more visible, and thus equitable for the women and faculty of color doing this labor.

In their *ALRA* research article “The Path Ahead for Recent PhDs,” Thomas Miller and Charles McMartin present findings that echo similar themes found in the University of

Michigan report. Referencing [The Chronicle of Higher Education's 2020 report](#), Miller and McMartin found that, during the pandemic, women and faculty of color in particular were negatively impacted by their university's expectations for tenure and promotion. In response to these findings, Miller and McMartin recommend universities, colleges, and departments recognize leadership from a distributed model in order to counter the invisible labor of service that disproportionately impacts women and faculty of color (102). These issues of invisible labor must be addressed if institutions of higher education continue to circulate more "adaptive leadership" models, which argue that higher education does not just serve its campus body but the surrounding campus community.³¹ Such a model operates based on the belief that, because our scholarship (whether that is teaching, research, or service) connects to community issues and concerns, the impact of our work extends beyond university walls and thus should be seen as a value by community members. Yet, as the University of Michigan's report and Miller and McMartin's research assert, for this argument to actually hold, critical action must be taken to adequately resource and reward those faculty members who embrace community-engaged practice as part of their institutional work. Without doing so, more early career scholars, women, and faculty of color tasked to take on this invisible labor, will burn out and ultimately leave. For example, Arellano et al.'s article, ["The Mass Exodus: Why People Are Leaving Academia and What We Can Learn from Their Stories"](#) published in *Constellations*, provides anecdotal insight into these challenges of sustaining an academic identity given the increase hostilities surrounding higher education. A similar conversation at the October 2025 Conference on Community Writing, titled "After Academia," highlighted perspectives on reimagining our academic work beyond the institution and featured a panel of formerly tenured or tenure track women the majority of whom left academia post-COVID.

Notably, this article arrives during a very real "mass exodus" of faculty in higher education. Personally, I have known nine individuals (either with tenured or in tenure track jobs) that have left their academic positions within the last five years. Their departures have often left me asking, *Why am I still here?* Wrestling with that question, I have come to realize that it is my commitment to community engagement that remains the driving reason of why I choose to remain employed by my institution. To be clear, I am deeply privileged to devote my time, energy, and the ability to receive a paycheck as I develop community research and teach experiential learning courses alongside community partners. But, real talk, this work is hard on my body. It takes emotional, physical, and mental fortitude. Perhaps more so now than ever, the work is lonely given how many of my colleagues have left. My hope in writing this article is that it can be of value to those community-engaged scholars who may also be contemplating why and if they should remain in academia. I anticipate that this article may be helpful in

³¹ In her article ["Adaptive or Transactional Leadership in Current Higher Education: A Brief Comparison,"](#) Natalie Khan defines adaptive leadership as an approach that "takes a holistic view of leadership" and "allows institutions to properly plan for change and consider many factors affecting the complex nature of the leadership relationship" (179). Because adaptive leadership considers all factors that affect an organization, it has become a popular stance to address the sociopolitical climate directly impacting public perceptions around higher education.

offering new ideas about how to better capture the invisible labor required in our community-engaged projects. Making that labor visible, I see, as one intervention to the misalignment between institutional value for community engagement and institutional policies guiding faculty community engagement.

In what follows then, I argue community-engaged scholarship requires relationship building. I explain how I understand relationship building as a form of invisible labor by demonstrating how community-engaged scholarship operates as a relational ecology. Doing so, I offer scenes that describe the embodied toll of doing this work, which I argue are necessary to unearthing the invisible labor practices community-engaged work requires. To demonstrate this, I offer personal anecdotes from my community-engaged work to provide examples of how to account for these labor practices. These scenes reveal how relationship building is essential to any ethical engagement with communities, and yet, it takes an incredible amount of time (not often compatible with the tenure clock) and is not a practice always taken into consideration by RTP committees. By drawing from my experiences, I hope to provide more transparency for others on how to best account for their (likely invisible) community-engaged labor at their institutions.

The Relational Ecology of Community-Engaged Projects

The documentation in RTP materials often correlates to how our work is cited, either by others in academic publications or by ourselves on our CVs. In fact, Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyay and Jordan Firth write, “maybe the most important way people show their work in research and establish their place in the conversation is through citations” (10). As such, it is often the academic article, book chapter, or conference presentation that becomes a formal citation on the CV due its genre. Megan Farve Hartline explains this is because

“university policies as enacted in professionalization documents leading up to tenure create a larger system that discourage emerging scholars from thinking of their broader body of engaged work as research, except when it results in traditional forms of scholarship like a publication or conference presentation” (594).

Citations thus make our work (whether teaching, research, or service) visible to our fields of study and our university, acting as a technical professionalization artifact (Janke et al. 29). Yet, for those scholars who position their research, teaching, and service as community-engaged (tenure track, teaching track, graduate students, or otherwise), the reality is that the traditional citation practices by which we make visible our labor do not account for the range of invisible labor required to do ethical and responsible community engagement. Part of this is due to the deep relationship building (and sustaining) that is required of community-engaged scholarship.

Relationship building (and the ability to sustain these relationships) should be understood as a practice in community-engaged work that encapsulates the intricate nuances of working with and alongside other bodies. In this way, relationship building is an embodied practice that evokes invisible labor (often in the form of emotional, intellectual, and material). Jessica Rose Corey and Barbara George understand the invisibility of this community-engaged labor as part of a larger and underexamined issue related to institutional focuses on high impact practices (HIP) (31). Community engagement often falls under the umbrella of HIPs, and while there

has been scholarship attesting to the positive impacts of community engagement as a HIP on students, little to no discussion has considered its impact on professors — whether tenure track or non-tenure track (Halonen and Dunn). Corey and George explain that within HIP literature:

There is often little mention of the work needed to facilitate an effective community-engaged project, including researching, networking, organizing, leading, mediating, and teaching. This lack of recognition, and therefore lack of support, for the work expended by these faculty members ultimately depletes faculty members' emotional, cognitive, and in some cases, financial resources, making both community-engaged projects and the faculty position itself unsustainable (30).

Community-engaged scholarship is thus an embodied experience, impacting the faculty member's body through various stressors (in part due to the lack of sufficient university support).

While the embodied effects of doing community-engaged work as a professor directly impacts the faculty member's body, other bodies are also being managed, negotiated with, communicated to, and often mentored. As such, because of the multiple bodies often involved in community engagement (the professor, the student/s, the community member/s, the university), a relational ecology informs much of the community-engagement. In this relational ecology, professors work alongside and with a range of stakeholders with various positionalities and, at times, differing exigencies informing their participation in the community engagement. Given that, the professor (as often situated as the project lead) is tasked to manage the invisible, embodied labor that is required when working with and alongside other stakeholders. Corey and George describe these embodied challenges writing that:

Material and emotional labor often coincides with researching, networking, organizing, leading, mediating, and teaching while facilitating community-engaged projects. Professors choosing to take on these projects not only often face the emotional task of helping students confront injustices but also face pressure to meet expectations of community partners, which reflects on the professor, the students, and the institution. Likewise, professors may experience stress over how to yield results that they can argue fit within their tenure, promotion, or other evaluation criteria. (38)

Understanding community engagement through the framework of a relational ecology allows for making visible the various and ever-evolving invisible layers of community-engaged labor, which are simply not accounted for by university policies. Furthermore, by adopting a relational ecology framework to community engagement, there can be more transparency in the reality that “like any relationship, the connections forged among people, ideas, and resources in community-engaged projects are messy” (Corey and George 42).

Given then how community-engaged projects are messy, as they involve the communication and coordination of multiple bodies, critical consideration must be given of one's positionality within a community-engaged relational ecology. That is, “the community-engaged scholar” is not a monolith identity. How one is positioned within and alongside the community-engaged project (and community members) matters in many ways, particularly in how it can contribute to invisible labor. Toward this aim, Corey and George suggest that those professors adopting community-engaged projects advocate for additional support — before, during, after, and throughout the project. Yet, other scholars have warned that while self-

advocacy for support is important, it can also function as an additional form of “communicative labor,” particularly for those who embody gendered identities (Gist-Mackey et al. 21). Meaning, “the concept of communicative labor exists at the intersections of workplace emotion, compassionate communication, and gendered occupational experiences” which can lead to disproportionate burdens of communication (Gist-Mackey et al. 29). When critically examining communicative labor, Gist-Mackey found that it is often women scholars in particular “who are interpellated into academic labor disproportionately” (42). The consequences of this gendered phenomenon is that “those who engage communicative labor from a critical standpoint are likely being systematically pushed to perform in ways that exceed individual capacity yet are not rewarded are supported institutionally for the communicative labor that is rendered visible” (Gist-Mackey et al. 42).³² Because communicative labor in community-engaged work often leads to what Gist-Mackey et al. find as “emotionally-laden work amid research, teaching, and service that threaten healthy work/life norms,” solutions to simply advocate for more support can at times replicate systems of invisible labor (21). How to move beyond practices that continue to make invisible the messy realities of a relational ecology in community engagement is a focus of this article.

In what follows, I build upon the work of Corey and George and Gist-Mackey et al. and demonstrate how relationship building becomes invisible yet central labor in community-engaged work. I describe three examples of relationship building across the traditional university categories of research, teaching, and service. Doing so, I articulate the unique challenges that come with relationship building and attempt to move beyond the suggestion that we simply advocate for our work by asking for more resources. Rather, I propose other forms of documentation as possible citation practices to make visible the centrality of relationships in community-engagement by proposing more community-centered approaches to the documentation of this work. Such an approach asks us to also consider how we may incorporate the perspectives from the communities we partner with as a form of citation, which may serve as an accountability check ensuring that our community-engaged work supports not just the university but is in service with and alongside the communities central to this work.

Invisible Experiences of Labor across Community-Engaged Research, Teaching, & Service

Critiques of community-engaged scholarship suggest work between universities and communities is too transactional and does not do enough to adequately address resource allocation and support to partnering communities (Clayton et al. 8; Enos and Morton 23). But as universities embrace community engagement, viewing it as an essential HIP, more scholars committing themselves to community-engaged projects have pushed against these critiques. Rhetoric, writing, and literacy scholars, like Aimée Knight, have identified practices that can work against the exploitation of community collaborations for university gain and scholarly

³² Arguably, Gist-Mackey et al.’s argument about the gendered experiences of communicative labor should be applied to consider the impact of communicative labor on other marginalized identities (i.e. LGBTQ+ professors and/or persons of color).

recognition. In her book *Community is the Way*, Knight asserts that we have done well with creating knowledge to establish our field, but she also asserts that a gap remains in our field, as there are “fewer resources [that] make visible the everyday, local action that we implement in our classrooms and in our communities” (6). These everyday, *invisible* practices include reciprocity (Opel and Sackey 1; Ríos 63), accountability (Itchuaqiyag 99), trust (Bloom-Pojar and Barker 92), openness (Shah 97), and shared lived experience (Collins 276). When operationalized collectively, they contribute to a slowing down of our work by focusing on the relationships central to the community-engaged project (Novotny, Davis, Grobel, and Vesbit 32). In fact, Julie Lindquist echoes much of this, reminding researchers invested in engaged scholarship that community work can be “unpredictable, time [...] intensive, and entirely inefficient” (651). As a result, community-engaged work “is a long uneven process” only made possible “within the carefully cultivated relationships of trust between researchers and participants” (Lindquist 649). The ability to slow our work in order to develop relationships can present challenges, especially in today’s ideological embrace of hyper-efficiency.

Slowing down our work (whether research, teaching, and service) is often a fraught experience for the faculty member, as it is antithetical to how universities and departments recognize and reward such work (i.e., through review, evaluation, and merit increases based upon completed and reportable projects). The relational ecology of community-engaged projects, and the practices they require, often conflict with the time-driven realities of being employed at a university. As Knight reminds us, the labor of relationship building remains invisible only until there is an academic publication or presentation that can be cited as evidence of such labor (6). In what follows, I detail experiences of building relationships through the three categories by which much of our RTP is evaluated: research, teaching, and service. I provide examples to illustrate the importance of slowness in this work and how adopting a slow approach facilitates a reciprocal, accountability, trusting, and open relational ecology. And I offer suggestions for how universities and departments can revise professional documentation practices to better account for (and cite) this necessary slow, relational approach that centers the community collaboration over the university gain.

Relationships in Community-Engaged Research

Example: An Infertility Art Exhibit During National Infertility Awareness Week

In April 2025, my arts-based storytelling organization curated a two-day long private exhibition titled “Light the Night: Stories Through A.R.T.” in New York City in conjunction with National Infertility Awareness Week (NIAW). This exhibit featured 20 patient-artists who turned to artmaking to process and represent their experiences with assisted reproductive technologies. The exhibit was sponsored and paid for by Progyny, Inc. which is a fertility and women’s health benefits company, and hosted with RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association. The goal of the exhibit was to share stories and art relevant to the challenges of building a family in the United States. For two days, Progyny, Inc. hosted private events with fertility stakeholders and used the exhibit as a backdrop for these events. It was estimated that about 170 fertility professionals, advocates, and clients of Progyny, Inc. attended events featuring the exhibit. This included members of the National Infertility’s staff and board

members. Two images below portray the exhibit and the various engagement attendees had with the exhibit.



Image 1 features a wide-shot of the exhibit and numerous attendees engaging with the exhibit content who were invited to the private event, “Light the Night: Stories Through A.R.T.”



Image 2 details a closer shot of an attendee engaging with the exhibit content for “Light the Night: Stories Through A.R.T.”

Discussion: Making Visible the Invisible Scholarly Labor of This Exhibit

The exhibit example raises two issues about community-engaged scholarship and the invisible labor involved in the execution of such an event. The first issue is simply one of time and, specifically, the length of time it takes to develop relationships with nationally recognized stakeholders in the infertility community (like Progyny, Inc. and RESOLVE). This is an important note especially for community-engaged scholars just beginning their work, as these types of “mass production” community events that cost around \$16,500 are made possible because of the years of relationship building. For instance, my organization was first introduced to members of Progyny’s team back in 2018. In fact, it was at RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association’s “Night of Hope Awards” where my organization was being recognized that introductions to Progyny were made. At that time, the Progyny team asked my co-director and me to participate in Progyny’s podcast. We did so and years passed until Progyny reached out to my organization in September of 2024 to inquire about the possibility of working with us on an NIAW exhibit. The months of September 2024 through January 2025 were then spent creating a proposal and budget for Progyny’s consideration as well as numerous virtual meetings to discuss Progyny’s intentions with the exhibit and its scope. As the exhibit dates grew near, time was spent during February 2025 and March 2025 to identify potential artwork for the exhibition. In early April 2025, a few weeks before the exhibit opened, artwork was secured and the exhibit was installed for NIAW.

I share this timeline and backstory to this exhibit as it showcases the long period of time it can take to not just host a patient art exhibit but really to demonstrate how this exhibit was only made possible through the years of Progyny, Inc. following my organization’s work and establishing credibility as two infertility advocacy organizations. It was through this that trust between Progyny, Inc. and my organization was established. Rachel Bloom-Pojar and Maria Barker write about the centrality of trust in their own community-engaged work, or *confianza*, as they refer to it (92). For them, trust (understood as *confianza*) is “much more dynamic than simply talking about whether someone trusts another person or not” (91). Rather, trust “is something that the promoters have developed an expertise with as they continuously work to build relationships and genuine connections with their communities” (Bloom-Pojar and Barker 91-92). And, as a result of the time this takes, “*confianza* comes with great responsibility and, at times, additional pressure to help people” (Bloom-Pojar and Barker 92). In this way, Bloom-Pojar and Barker remind us that “researchers need to recognize that *confianza* takes time and needs to extend beyond any specific project, grant, or interaction. It must be built up through consistent and genuine interactions that center relationships and mutually beneficial goals” (92). I argue that the NIAW exhibit illustrates Bloom-Pojar and Barker’s concept of trust in action, which often can be in conflict with the timelines established by our university merit committees. In other words, there is not a lot of reward for building deep trust at our universities, yet it is arguably necessary as it allows for an openness between community scholars and the partnering community.

In the NIAW exhibit example, openness was a needed value to be put into practice. Much of this is because exhibitions are not neutral. They tell a larger curatorial story. And in the instance of the April 2025 one, it was an exhibition focused on the range of persons living with infertility (e.g., persons of color, LGBTQ+ persons, single parents by choice) and sociocultural

obstacles (e.g., no federal insurance mandate to cover infertility, cultural stigmas attached to infertility, misconceptions about the mental stress of an infertility diagnosis). The ability to curate a show that invited the diversity of infertility as a topic was available to my organization because of the embrace of openness between my organization and Progyny, Inc.

Community-engaged scholar Rachel Shah discusses “openness” as an asset-based knowledge production tool in community projects, which works to redefine intellectualism to “interact with difference in a generative way” (106). For her, practicing openness in community projects involves embracing “open minds, open construction of self and others, open hearts, open revision, open communication, and open structures” (97). In this way, Shah asserts “openness enriches critical community-based epistemologies by suggesting that it is not simply enough to make a theoretical argument for the validity of community stories” (39). Openness, in this way, suggests that it is not just who is speaking that is important as what is said and can require “those from the center sometimes hav[ing] to defer to those with experiential knowledge of a situation” (123). Because of the trust that had been established between my organization and Progyny, Inc. there emerged the ability to display open, and at times, conflicting representations of infertility in the exhibition. For instance, some of the artwork displayed a narrated story that highlighted the unsuccessful ability to build a family through assisted reproductive technology. For some at the event, this could have been interpreted as antithetical to the more hopeful (and even happy ending) narratives presented. Specifically, for Progyny, Inc., as a benefits company attempting to demonstrate the need for employers to provide fertility benefits, the stories of IVF not working could have been flagged as inappropriate. But because of the trust and the open conversations about my organization’s values and Progyny’s values, the competing narratives were allowed to be told at the event and demonstrates the realities that, even with fertility insurance coverage, sometimes the happy ending doesn’t result.

Finally, the fact that the exhibit was private also lends challenges for community-engaged scholars about how to document the exhibit's impact as an act of research. As a closed event, it can be difficult to make visible its impact to university members.³³ Private events have a particular advantage to ensuring impact. For instance, at the NIAW exhibit, Progyny, Inc. was tasked with bringing key fertility stakeholders to the exhibit. In this way, while the exhibit could not be viewed by the public, those who are either practicing fertility doctors, infertility advocates and lawyers, as well as clients of Progyny, Inc. who provide employers with fertility benefits were directly engaging with the exhibit content. As influential stakeholders in the infertility community, this exhibit may not necessarily translate at the university-level, but it certainly holds weight and aids in further establishing the relevancy of community-engaged work in communities like the infertility community. Still, questions of how community-engaged scholars are recognized at their universities for this work remain.

³³ Arguably, this very article in which I’m discussing the event, is one attempt to make this scholarly curatorial work visible.

Proposed solutions to the question “How do you make that labor visible in our research?”

The example above illustrates how some community-engaged research projects require time to build relationships with community stakeholders, especially those who hold influence in their communities but often do not engage with universities. Issues of making non-campus related events and activities that involve the community-engaged scholar have not fully been discussed in our discipline, and yet, this work no doubt occurs. One such solution is to write about the event and the labor involved for an academic journal, much like what this article is. However, I want to push against the obvious solution as it reinforces the need for the community-scholars to produce an academic piece as justification to count the labor. Rather, the labor itself that it took to host the event (i.e., the NIAW exhibit) should simply be the “countable” artifact. What would such an artifact look like then?

One solution is the inclusion of community-engaged events on CVs and even personal websites. For instance, at my institution, there is the ability to include a section for tenure and promotion purposes that allows for the documentation of exhibits. While I appreciate the ability to have CV lines for community exhibits, I am skeptical of how much weight that actually bears and the full comprehension of the exhibition’s community impact. Meaning, the exhibition’s goal was to engage community members about a researched and scholarly informed topic (i.e. infertility). Yet, much of our RTP materials address our scholarship in the context of our disciplinary training and identities, and not the impact it has on our communities. To respond to such a disconnect, I propose adopting citational practices that actively include the documentation of community partner impact by including numbers reflective of community participation/attendance, the citation of media clips that resulted from the community-engaged event, and statements of impact from community members on merit and annual review documents. While such documentation could be added to tenure and promotion applications, there should also be considerations for how such engagement is measured on academic reviews. Given that, in what ways may we need to rethink the yearly documentation that measures our scholarly impact and output?

At my institution, we are required to list the percentage of contributions made to a collaborative and co-written article. For example, on my tenure and promotion materials, this documentation looked as so:

Gagnon, J. and **Novotny, M.** (2020). Revisiting Research as Care: A Call to Decolonize Narratives of Trauma. *Rhetoric Review*, 39(4), 486-501.
***50% collaborative contribution**

Other universities sometimes also require “journal impact factors” that measure the publication’s impact, measuring how often other scholars reference the publication in their published scholarship. Thus, enforcing a merit-based evaluation of a scholar’s citational presence. Yet, in the case of community-engaged projects, how one makes visible the impact of that project/event is often not measured. As the NIAW example demonstrates, community-engaged projects are collaborative genres that include multiple and various engagements with people. To better account and measure its impact, I propose a citational practice on the CV that may look like this:

Novotny, M., Gressel, K., & Horn, E. (2025). “Light the Night: Stories Through A.R.T.”
A private two-day exhibition sponsored by Progyny, Inc. in Honor of National Infertility Awareness Week. New York City, NY.

- *50% collaborative contribution***
- *Viewed by 170 infertility professionals and advocates***
- *Exhibit included 26 pieces of artwork and personal narratives created by infertility patients from around the United States***
- *Received \$16,547 in sponsorship funds to cover exhibition costs***

Including these impact numbers can then make more visible the impact of the community-engaged scholarship. Furthermore, I would encourage other community-engaged scholars to consider how they may cite other community-engaged projects in their work. Meaning, by making the choice to list our projects on our CVs, we can provide moments for our fellow community-engaged colleagues to cite our projects and not just the academic publication. In this way, this citational practice implores Dawn Opel and Donnie Johnson Sackey’s concept of reciprocity in communist-engaged work, which advises that “we revise or even abandon accepted notions of partnership in community-engaged scholarship” as a way to avoid “privileg[ing] academic notions of justice and balance that might be inconsistent with community beliefs and needs” (2).

Rethinking our citational practices can better account for the invisible labor of community-engaged work requires. While we do a good job thinking critically about who we cite in our academic publications, we must continue to extend that critical inquiry to also what we cite – including deliverables and labor practices that are not just in the form of an academic publication or white paper. We need to start citing the invisible labor that is part of our CVs, just not always featured on the first 2-3 pages. Instead, we need to cite the service, the exhibitions, the websites, and the public talks our community-engaged work requires. Doing so will demonstrate the value embedded in our careful, relationship-building work that is community-engaged.

Relationships in Community-Engaged Teaching

Example: Teaching A Grant Writing Course Collaborating with Community Partners

Prior to going to graduate school, I worked at a fundraising firm where I was trained to research and write grants for clients, many of whom were non-profit organizations. After graduate school, I was hired at a different institution tasked with developing professional writing courses. Grant writing became one of those courses, and since then I have taught that course on a regular basis. While many other scholar-teachers in writing, rhetoric, and literacy studies have designed grant writing courses (see the [Call for submissions for Teaching Grant Writing: Deepening Learning, Deepening Engagement](#)), my course is designed as an experiential learning course where students learn the fundamentals of grant writing, from how to work with

grant funding databases to drafting a full grant proposal. Students learn these skills by being assigned a community partner for the semester and serving as the community partner's grant intern. In this way, the student gains first-hand knowledge of the community's mission and funding needs, and in doing so, researches and works with members of the community partner staff to draft a grant application. I use this design as a rationale for this approach to teaching grant writing as I understand grant funding as largely a relational project. Funders want to understand who the organization is and what they are funding. Grantee organizations are often working within particular communities to support community needs. Additionally, securing a grant for a community organization often takes time because for relationships to form between the funder and the organization. Because of these factors, I explain to students that while they can write a beautiful grant, funding success is not always relative to the quality of writing, but the establishment of relationship building.

Discussion: Making Visible the Invisible Scholarly Labor of This Course

Like any other course, there is the obvious labor of prepping a syllabus and preparing materials and assessments. Yet, this grant writing course, because of its experiential learning design and collaboration with community partners, requires additional, often invisible, labor. Specifically, prior to the course beginning, I connect with my institution's center for Student Experience and Talent (SET), which supports faculty who offer experiential learning courses. With the help of SET, I write up a description of the course, and the type of projects students will work on, to solicit interest for community member involvement. This solicitation phase takes several weeks, often when I am not on contract, and frequently involves emails and virtual meetings with potential partners. During this time, I often am building rapport with community partners. We have conversations about the purpose of the course, the type of students enrolled in the course (e.g., major, prior writing experience, undergrad level), the general schedule, how student placement would occur, and the current financial and material needs of the community organization. This is largely a relationship building practice where I am attempting to get to know the partner and vice versa. This work enacts Bloom-Pojar and Barker's concept of trust and also invites open conversation about how well the course structure and design may fit with the needs and expectations of the community partner. Yet, the only indicator to signal the appearance of such labor is the fact that I categorize the class as an "experiential learning" course, which from a university perspective can range in meaning.

In addition to teaching students about grant writing, I also serve as a mentor helping students navigate coursework and communication with community partners. Students have a range of experiences with community members. Some have never worked with a community partner for a class, while others may have this experience. In this way, I am also building into my curriculum professionalization materials that encourage students to understand themselves as writing professionals. Encouraging this new frame of understanding for students is for me a form of emotional labor, requiring that I support students as they start to develop professional experiences and relationships beyond the university classroom.

The engaged structure of the course adds additional complex factors, often immune to non-community partner courses. For instance, for many students the outcome of the drafted grant (aka if the grant was secured or not) will likely not be known at the time of the course

completion. Meaning, student evaluations are somewhat incomplete in fully evaluating the outcome of their work. Furthermore, because this course is directly tied to community engagement, there is also a disconnect in the fact that community partners are not provided an opportunity to assess the course. While the university has systems to ensure students can provide evaluations upon course completion, there is no formal mechanism for community members. In this way, there are disconnects with how such courses reinforce student accountability at the expense of community accountability. Cana Itchuaqiyag warns of the dangers of ignoring how our community work may not always remain accountable to those communities we work with (97). Writing about her own experiences, she explains “I might have the credibility to do research in my community based on my fancy degrees, position, and identity — but that credibility don’t mean shit if I don’t hold myself accountable to the self-determination and sovereignty of my people” (99). Rather, for Itchuaqiyag, accountability means “caring more about the needs and safety of my community more than my own professional needs. Simply, it means putting my community first—in the position of power—when I choose to engage with them in my professional capacity” (99). Her critique of accountability in community settings is one that warrants more critical examination of where and to what degree community partners appear and are valued in our evaluation metrics.

Proposed solutions to the question “How do you make that labor visible in our teaching?”

Because many universities and colleges have centers (like SET) focused on community engagement, I argue that these centers could do more to capture the impact of courses that collaborate with community partners. The onus of making visible this labor should not solely be on the individual instructor. Rather, there are larger university mechanisms that can and should work to understand the impact these courses have on the community, in addition to students instructors. In my grant writing course, the known impact of how successful that specific grant research and proposal may be for a community partner may not be known until the course is complete. However, follow-up and continued engagement with the community partner could and should happen from a university perspective and not necessarily the instructor. For example, in my grant fall 2022 writing course, the success and impact of the skills taught were only measured in my teaching evaluations. However, in February 2025, I received an email from a past student in that course who informed me about her recent grant success. She shared:

“I took your grant writing course in the Fall of 2022, and I wanted to thank you for your incredible instruction throughout the semester. I’ve been awarded every grant I’ve applied for so far! Most notably, I just received \$4.25 million from the Flexible Facilities Program (FFP) Grant, which will fund the construction of a new library and community center. A tremendous amount of work went into this application, and I couldn’t have done it without the foundation you provided in your class. Your class most definitely enhanced my professional abilities but has also created a ripple effect that will now benefit my entire community, particularly the underserved populations. I’m grateful for the difference you’ve made in my life and the lives of those I serve.”

I offer this example because it demonstrates how the impact of an experiential learning course is not always directly known nor realized at the end of the semester. In this example, nearly three years passed, demonstrating how the immediacy of these skills may not always be

known or clear to students at the conclusion of course. Yet, the labor required to facilitate such a course can lead to successful outcomes. Mechanisms that the university can support to either follow-up with past students and/or past community partners in these types of courses may be one potential approach to addressing both the length of time it can take to document “success” of the skills gained in these courses as well as the direct impact such skills can have on communities.

Because some aspects of facilitating these types of courses involve open discussions and building trust with community partners, documents that can speak to reciprocity can be added value to ensuring these courses remain accountable to community partners. Gabriela Ríos, for example, reminds other scholars interested in working with communities that reciprocity is established through the building of our relationships with the communities that we research (63). As a practice, reciprocity requires an awareness of how our own positionality impacts and can subconsciously influence the decisions we make in collaborating with our communities for research. As such, Ríos cautions us against “assuming that our disciplinary standards define our commitment to communities” (63). To avoid this, one option may be to build in opportunities for community partners to evaluate courses. By incorporating the community partner experience in these evaluative metrics, we can provide a more balanced documentation and representation of the range of labor required of instructors. Such documentation can then be referenced later on in RTP materials.

As a discipline, we can work to cite not just the syllabus when referencing examples of other community-engaged teaching practices but also cite their impact. In this way, we can understand that the teaching notes on our CV can be added to as we hear from either past students, community members, or the centers on our campus, who can track the impact of our experiential learning courses through follow-up with students and community members. For example, prior to hearing from my grant writing student, I listed my grant writing course on my CV as: Grant Writing (*Fall 2022*). Yet, this citational style fails to adequately capture the labor involved in this course. Instead, when citing experiential learning, I encourage us to adopt a resume style, as it better captures the range of work required to instruct such a course. One model for this may be listing and describing the course as:

Grant Writing (*Fall 2022*)

**Paired 15 undergraduate students with community partners to conduct grant research and writing*

**A student in the 2022 course, received a \$4.25 million community grant which she attributed to skills gained from my course*

**5 of the community partners from this course, elected to collaborate on future experiential learning courses I instructed*

Such an approach makes visible how these types of courses, as a result of relationship building and time spent cultivating student professionalization and community partner relationships, result in continued academic and community impact. This can serve as a visible marker for university reviewers and for our disciplinary community members, who may be

interested in adopting a similar course design. Demonstrating the impact of the course through more descriptors aids in adding to the argument for the additional labor required of such a course, in spite of their reservations about the intense labor it requires.

Relationships in Community-Engaged Service

Example: Serving as a Steering Committee Member for Building Families Alliance of WI

Many community-engaged scholars serve on community boards related to their research and/or teaching. In such a capacity, scholars often operate as a private citizen who offer their professional and personal experience to topics and issues important to the community organization. Often, while these are unpaid positions, a motivating factor to participate is derived from the shared lived experience one has with the organization's mission. Shared lived experience is a feminist practice theorized extensively by Patricia Hill Collins, who explains that "for most African-American women those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences. Thus lived experiences as a criterion for credibility frequently is invoked by U.S. Black women when making knowledge claims" (276). It is through a shared identity of experiencing the world that an unspoken discourse about what it means to be a Black woman (in the case of Collins' work) emerges. Similarly, collective knowledge about being a marginalized body (in this case an infertile body) evokes a similar type of shared lived experience, whereby a shared sense of knowing what it means to live as an infertile person emerges in a world where the body is assumed to be a fertile body. This experience can serve as a motivating factor to participate on committees advocating for the needs of those who hold a similar lived understanding of the world because of their shared identity.

My personal and professional experience with infertility has positioned me to serve on several different community leadership positions as a volunteer. For example, since 2021, I have participated as a Steering Committee Member for the Building Families Alliance of WI (known as the BFA), which brings together patients, medical professionals, and supporters from across the state to increase awareness of and advocate for mandated insurance coverage for infertility in Wisconsin. This organization was formed following a 2020 Federal Infertility Advocacy Day, in which I served as an organizer for the state. Understanding that access to fertility coverage is both a national and state-level issue, following that 2020 Advocacy Day, the group of Federal Advocacy Day participants decided to create the state-level organization, referred to as the BFA. As a member of the steering committee, I bring both my personal infertility experience to the group as well as my professional expertise through my work with my organization and as an English professor. My role on this committee is to identify methods to ethically recruit and share patient stories that reveal the challenges they encounter when trying to build a family in a state with limited access to fertility care. As someone with access to a university, I also support the committee by identifying potential grant funding opportunities to support the organization's fiscal needs. Additionally, I often rely on my professional infertility networks established through my organization to help connect the BFA with other similar state-based infertility advocacy groups to inform them of the future

directions of our advocacy. While the committee meets monthly over Zoom, much of the individual expectations of serving as a steering committee member occur on one's own time. And while it is hoped that each member "carries their weight," there is no formal assessment or evaluation to ensure each member fulfills their duties; we all are volunteers after all.

Discussion: Making Visible the Invisible Scholarly Labor of This Volunteer Role

Occupying the position of volunteer for this organization — one that is not affiliated with a university nor the discipline, poses challenges to documenting the many ways that my volunteering supports the aims of my scholarly identity and work. While I can and certainly do list my role as a Steering Committee Member on my CV and on other forms of annual review, the impact such a volunteer role has upon my community-engaged scholarship and teaching is often unclear and invisible. My service and the labor I do on this committee may not directly impact my university or my students. However, this service is key to fostering relationships that can (and have led) to research collaborations and teaching partnerships.

For example, serving on the BFA has allowed me to meet and establish relationships with a range of infertility stakeholders that otherwise I likely would not meet (i.e. fertility doctors, patient advocates, and lobbyists). Connecting to this network of diverse individuals is made possible because of our shared commitments to improving access to fertility care in our state. Through this shared commitment and the ability to work together over the course of nearly five years, we have built and established not only trust amongst each other but a deep understanding of the various skills we each offer to the issue. In my capacity, because of my research in health and medicine, I was made aware by my institution of a local community health grant which would support community health projects. I brought this grant opportunity to the BFA, where it was decided we should apply for funding. Collectively, a group of us worked on writing the grant proposal, which I supported through my knowledge of teaching grant writing. Such illustrates an example of invisible labor; work that I am supporting because of my skills sets yet is not directly tied to any university recognition of such labor.

The relationships that are established through this type of volunteer service can reap several benefits, beyond simply "getting to know each other." For instance, a fertility doctor, who also serves on the BFA committee, recently recommended me to serve as a lay reviewer for the American Society for Reproductive Medicine's (ASRM) educational department, which is tasked with creating patient-informed shared decision-making documents. This opportunity was made possible to me only because of the fertility doctor's working relationship with ASRM and their knowledge of my work, which they know focuses on shared decision-making in fertility settings. Here, relational ecology is at work—connecting individuals who share an experience with other individuals who work similarly on topics of fertility expertise. While the ASRM example again illustrates my decision to take on another form of unpaid service, I also understand how such service can inform my own research and teaching practices on the topic. Therefore, it is a service that will aid in my professional development, which is arguably an outcome that my university can and should recognize. Meaning, understanding service as labor should not be solely understood as labor that the faculty member provides; but rather that the labor can also directly influence and generate deeper conversations, insights, and relationships with other stakeholders around topics that connect to the faculty member's expertise. Such is

then a more reciprocal understanding of what it means to engage in forms of service as labor. The time and work spent on non-university or discipline related service organizations yield results that frequently are not always visible to the university, leading to the question of how to address such invisibility in our service work.

Proposed solutions to the question “How do you make that labor visible in our service?”

While there is the ability to list non-university or disciplinary service on one’s CV, the actual labor and generative activity that it can produce is not made clear by a CV line. In this way, other forms of documentation can and should be included. For instance, one option is to create a personal website where one can add a section documenting the connections between service and professionalization. My website does this by including a webpage titled, “Infertility Advocacy” which attempts to make more transparent not just how I view myself as a scholar-advocate, but my service to the infertility community and how it connects to my research and teaching. Arguably, though, I am not convinced that my university actually has seen or read that page, as it is not part of any formal university evaluative document.

Instead, community impact statements can encourage universities to better understand the relational ecologies of a faculty member’s community service. These statements can function as testimonials from the community partner regarding the involvement and impact of the scholar-volunteer. While many tenure and promotion deliverables ask for scholars to write about their community partnerships, such a process often only highlights the faculty member’s perspective. A community impact statement can serve to address this disparity and bring in the community partner’s insight as a valuable part of the evaluation criteria. Further, the impact statement can serve as a testimony to how the faculty member’s labor (which may be invisible to the university or understood as less ‘rigorous’ compared to other academic genres) carries significant weight and impact in their community. In other words, the community impact statement gives a voice to that community partner and can encourage the university to see the community member’s insight as a factor in assessing the merit of the faculty member’s work. To be clear, the adoption of such an impact statement would require equitable compensation from the university as writing the impact statement would ask the community partner to engage in an act of labor at the expense of the university. Compensation is thus a necessary component of this practice. But still, it is a valuable one as it shifts how universities evaluate the impact of community engagement in faculty settings to an evaluative system that asks faculty members (and universities) to be accountable to the communities they claim to service. In this way, it holds our community-engaged scholarship accountable to the community changemaking our collaboration seeks to foster.

Across each example, I have tried to illustrate how community-engaged scholarship measured by each academic category (research, teaching, service) often involves the ability to have time and use that time to then cultivate relationships that are built upon trust, openness, reciprocity, shared experiences, and ultimately ensure that our community-engaged intentions are driven by the community’s needs rather than the institution’s. This is tense work and deeply impacts the body of the community-engaged scholar who must navigate the tensions of working across competing timelines, manage resources and (at times) students, and account

for their labor to their institution. Furthermore, the examples that I presented are ones that are grounded in my own positionality as a tenure-track professor working at a research university in a department that very clearly declares value of and support for community-engaged scholarship. My own positionality must be noted as there are many other community-engaged scholars who do not occupy such a position, which certainly can elevate inequities and challenges to making visible the time needed to build successful, ethical relationships in community-engaged projects. Acknowledging this, I conclude the article with a larger disciplinary call for us to rethink our own citational politics. By citing the alternative genres our community-engaged scholarship produces, we can model disciplinary-specific interventions for the larger issues of misalignment between institutional values and policies, which many scholars experience when attempting to document their community engagement at their universities and/or colleges.

Rethinking Our Discipline's Citational Politics

The sociopolitical climate surrounding higher education serves as a reminder that our work and scholarship is not neutral. Our work lives and circulates in a larger ecology that can influence the public's perspective about what it means to not just work at a university or college, but also what it means to claim to be a community-engaged scholar. For rhetoric, writing, and literacy studies, we have done much to reflect upon the meaning of identifying as "community-engaged" as well as to develop guidelines to ensure and evaluate ethical outcomes of such scholarship (["Promotion and Tenure Resources"](#)). However, as this article has demonstrated, the labor of such work does not always neatly align within the larger institutional structures like review, tenure, and promotion materials that measure the impact of our community engagement. This disconnect between the labor of community engagement and institutional practices measuring merit and impact are not new; and yet, the misalignment between the two continues to remain with Kelly and Given noting that "much of the existing research is focused on institutional rather than academics' experiences" (442-443). Hence, a critical gap in how institutions support the required labor of community engagement. Janke et al. explains why such tensions in community engagement and university policies have remained the norm, finding that

"if the goal of policy revisions related to community-engaged scholarship is to shift the academic culture of the institution...then adding language, while important, is not enough" and argues instead that policy revisions that reform academic culture should take place "at the organizational locations where faculty live" (44).

To aid realigning academic culture within a community-centered paradigm, we should ponder the small actions we as a discipline can take in order to better address the invisible labor of community engagement. One example may take the form of rethinking our own citational practice.

As a discipline, we have embraced critical citation practices (Itchuaqiyah and Frith 13; Pritchard) and understand that "citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow" (Ahmed 1). In this way, more critical conversations around citation practices have emerged in writing, rhetoric, and literacy studies. Arguably, we

are a discipline which models citational justice by “moving away from individualistic views of authorship and toward a shared, reciprocal understanding of how knowledge is produced” (Ahmed et al. 79). Other scholars like Tannenbaum et al. have called for similar reform related to citational practices. For instance, those who may transition in their scholarly lives face new citational questions about how to account for their new “identity infrastructures” as they must contend with how to accommodate name changes in prior publications. Towards this idea, Ahmed et al. encourages scholars to consider how our citations may better account for other “dialogic practices” that resist Western intellectual thought that “knowledge is produced in a vacuum” (80). Instead, they encourage scholars to transform our citational practices to “underscore their relational nature, reconceptualizing them as acts of listening, as opposed to transactional or performative practices” (Ahmed et al. 80). Their call is one that we should begin to embrace by moving beyond our already established critical disposition about who we cite and move toward what we are citing. I build upon these ideas to suggest that one way we can begin to intervene in the invisible labor required of community-engaged projects is collectively citing the products we develop that are not part of the traditional academic genre (i.e. the journal article, the monograph). Instead, we need to make the relationships and the range of invisible labor involved in that work visible to not only our institutions but also our larger discipline, if we are to truly claim to be a field that values writing as a tool for changemaking.

I end this article then with an invitation for community-engaged writing, rhetoric, and literacy scholars to critically examine their own citational practices by asking: *What am I listing on my CV? How may I include other non-traditional academic genres on that CV or even a personal website to make that community labor visible to others in my discipline and my community partnerships? What am I citing my academic publications and at my academic conferences? Are they traditional academic genres or do they represent the breadth of community-engaged labor? How can I use citations to elevate the slow community work of my disciplinary colleagues?*

These are large questions, but they are ones that need to be tackled at this moment of increased precarity around higher education, considering the commitments we claim to have with our communities. The article [“Accounting for ‘Alternative’ Genres in Community-Engaged Work”](#) offers potential models for adopting citational practices that recognize the non-traditional deliverables often produced by community-engaged work (Novotny 53). Still, such a move that I’m advocating for takes time. My hope though is that we can begin to critically reflect on the questions related to what we cite and, in doing so, identify new citational practices as a response. Citing not just our publications but the other forms of labor (such as exhibits and webpages and mentoring) are equally essential to doing community engagement. Adopting more critical citational practices that account for these “alternative” deliverables may elevate the deep care work and labor of community-engaged scholarship. While we are not the only discipline who values this type of work, we understand the rhetorical power of writing and citations. We can and should do more at this moment to better address how we make our labor in these community projects visible if we are to sustain this laborious and embodied scholarship during these precarious and trying times in higher education.

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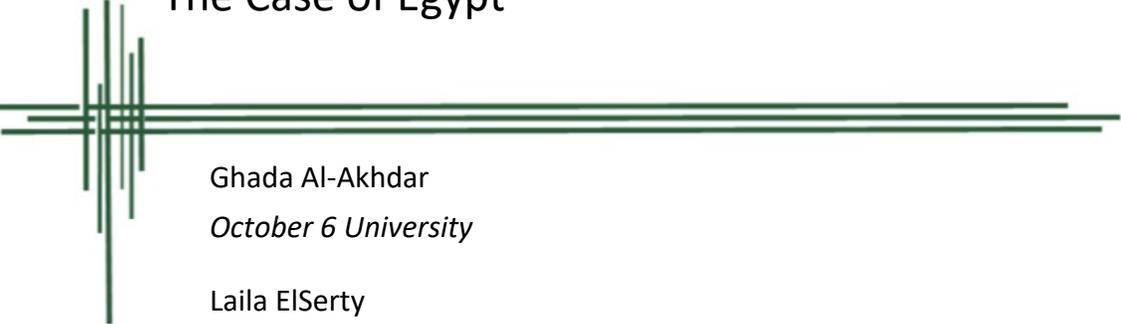
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The Impact of USAID Program Suspension on Stakeholders: The Case of Egypt



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Abstract

This study attempts to explore the impact of the suspension of USAID funds on three Egyptian education stakeholder groups: students, staff and administrators, and faculty. The lived experiences of stakeholders, narrated in retrospection, were analyzed from a lens of phenomenology and in terms of Paul Ricoeur's narrative identity theory. The theoretical framework reveals the process of engagement with the story and how it impacts readers' identities as academics and as humans. Our aim is to foreground the stories and their context in order to explore the suspension impact from a cultural and ethical viewpoint. Multiple interviews were conducted to collect data for analysis. Results comprise themes of loss of educational opportunities, uncertainty about the future, inequalities and exclusion, psychological and emotional toll, standing in solidarity and navigating program cancellation challenges, institutional/policy responses, and recommendations.

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“At that time, I felt shocked, disappointed, and even betrayed. I couldn't understand why such an important program that helped so many young people was suddenly halted. It felt like the dreams of students who worked hard for this opportunity were no longer valid. There was sadness, but also confusion, about the reasons behind such a sudden decision” (USAID student, 2025).

The suspension of USAID funds had an impact on three Egyptian education stakeholder groups: Students, Staff and Administrators, and Faculty. The effects on the stakeholders we interviewed were mirrored, to varying degrees, in our own lives as events unfolded and many of those effects are difficult to bear. We wanted to see if others were also experiencing the phenomenon of a major funding and support service being abruptly cut off in ways similar to our experiences, and we wondered if equitable mitigations were found, not only for ourselves but also for our students, colleagues, and institutions.

We decided that this shared experience of many students would be worthy of investigation as a phenomenon that impacts students' prospects, as well as those of teachers and academics who were involved (van Manen). The stories of USAID termination bring about an intellectual opportunity for investigation. They are also shared, contextualized, and processed/mediated both in interviews and in research in an attempt for agency and ethical identity formation.

Our team met in an online section of the Thomas R. Watson Conference in 2024. We have been meeting frequently ever since, and, during one of our meetings, the topic of USAID suspension was raised, which piqued our interest in understanding the impact of suspension of USAID funds and the instability recently created in the world since the US election of the 47th president and his appointment of an independent financial consultant. Since this had never

happened before, outside of the business world, we were wondering how best to study such a phenomenon and the impact it was having on the lives of those it touched. After some debate, we settled on the framework of hermeneutical phenomenology. In phenomenological research, the primary concern is with how individuals experience and interpret events in their everyday lives, and with the meanings that these experiences hold for them (Smith). We wondered what the effects would be on the lived experiences of faculty, staff and administrators, and students as this instability rippled outward.

Before scrutinizing the phenomenon at hand, it is important to understand the role USAID plays—or to be specific, has played—in reforming education in Egypt. While the main purpose of the organization that would become USAID was originally to deter communism, it was quickly found that offering assistance to nations that needed it was a very effective purveyor of soft power, realigning international cooperation. “The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 was signed by President Kennedy on Labor Day, and Congress required the merger of the preexisting assistance agencies into the new agency within 60 days” (Norris). In the late 1970s, after the Egyptian-Israeli war and around the time of the leadup to the Camp David Accords, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) program emerged as a long-term development partnership and a sign of the restored Egyptian-American diplomatic relations in many areas of development (Brown, 5). Aid projects in Egypt began in 1975 (Farouk). The education projects that we focus on came into existence in 2004 with the Education Reform Program (AIR).

The American Institutes for Research (AIR), through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), helps Egypt facilitate reform efforts through the Egypt Education Reform Program (ERP). The ERP is designed to serve and strengthen the quality of formal and non-formal education programs in Egypt. The core premise of the ERP is to establish an effective and efficient decentralized education model. AIR is the lead partner in the ERP, providing highly qualified staff to manage the various project implementation sites and programs. Other partners include EDC and World Education (Tofig).

When the 47th president issued an executive order that indiscriminately cut off aid, it left them no time to adapt to a different geopolitical landscape. While courts and congress in the USA decide the legality of the orders, the halt in funding “included \$35 million for the Egyptian-American Higher Education Initiative” (Fouad). The USAID Egyptian Pioneers program, “which was established in November 2022, for which USAID has awarded the American University in Cairo \$86 million” (Jenkins, par.3), was also cut a full five years short of its nine-year commitment.

The students, who are recipients of USAID grants, include 877 students who are studying at public, private, and national universities, as well as 200 students at the American University in Cairo (Tag). “The Higher Education Ministry has since stepped in to make sure those students are able to continue the semester” (Enterprise Ventures LLC). The power vacuum the executive orders created is significant, and it is largely unknown who might step into that void and what agendas they may bring with them.

Without this public good that USAID provided and encouraged, the way opens for the corporatization of education that may not produce results aligned with the goals of Egypt, nor

those of the Academy at large. We can see that some businesses have already moved to fill this void by negotiating agreements with the Egyptian government (U.S. Embassy Cairo).

Frameworks and Theory

Why do we study stories about the USAID? Is it relevant to our identity as academics and as humans? We are a group of academics and humanitarians who were deeply moved by the USAID study program's termination. We decided to apply a phenomenological framework to study the lived experiences of those involved in the programs, especially students, and share their perspectives.

Phenomenological frameworks focus on first-person perspectives/first-hand accounts, highlighting intentionality and consciousness. This approach draws on Paul Ricoeur's narrative identity theory to offer a frame of interpretation for these first-person perspectives. Therefore, it is not just enlisting stories on top of each other, but the study engages with their viewpoints to explore boundaries of agency and ethics via the dynamic interaction between the text (story), its reader (researcher), and its implications on the construction of user identity.

Phenomenology focuses on structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view, intentionality, and *qualia* by which the individuality of the experience, even in its sharedness, becomes as important as its context/conditions of the experience. Our ability as humans to practice phenomenology is based on our agency for experiencing and doing, how we perform, and the intentionality and context of our performance. In this regard, phenomenology takes place after the experience (as a sort of reflection) and not during the experience itself. Our interviews served as that space of reflection and storytelling for our participants.

Through reflection, common or shared experiences become points of interest rather than fleeting experiences. Stories of the USAID study program's termination are shared, contextualized, narrated (in interviews) and mediated (in research) in an attempt to explore our chances for agency and ethical identity formation.

Following the path cleared by classical phenomenologists, we attempt to understand experiences as stories of self-narrative, opening up a dynamicity between self, context, language, perspective and intentionality/ethicality in the construction of our academic/human identities.

Narrative Identity Theory

According to Ricoeur, self-identity is an in-between position, dynamic and constantly restructured through the mediation and interpretation of its surrounding narratives. The self is narrative, organized in relation to the past and its contexts as well as its interpretation. Rather than centering the being in an objective reality, he refers to the self as always anchored or situated in its context and linguistic and sensory details (Reagan 28). This is why his work is well-suited to the analysis of interviews. For Ricoeur, experience generates text and text structures both experience and its meaning. Textuality for him refers to narrating the story, language, plot, voice, and action, but unlike post-structuralists, language for him is only second-order, and the experience itself comes to the forefront. In *Time and Narrative*, the self is constructed via stories or narratives at different points in time. Then in *Oneself as Another*,

the subject is defined by both the bios and logos. Bios refers to the biological frame or body. Logos, on the other hand, refers to our dreams and imaginative experiences. Metaphor, and not reality, reveals how the collective social memory becomes significant.

Agency comes in with the construction of experiences as narratives. It is the interaction between the *ipse* (self as unique) and *idem* (self as same) that unfolds potency for the construction of meaning. Experiences as stories of the USAID program termination speedily capture Ricoeur's three-folded narration process: prefiguration, configuration and refiguration.

Prefiguration is the known and identified context, cultural cues and presuppositions of the experience. Configuration refers to actions where agent, tense, time and voice interact to create a *discordant concordant*. Ricoeur's idea of conflict is that it touches the world of the reader. In other words, the world of the story dismantles, and the reader rediscovers and rethinks realities within the story world (Time and Narrative, 158-163). Empathy, or what Ricoeur calls *benevolent spontaneity*, relates the self and the other in an ethical perspective (Oneself as Another, 190). The future, thus, is present as a set of potential narratives in which the reader might take part. According to Ricoeur, there is a pre-understanding given through a *semantics of action*, that is, a sense of possible choices, actions and their consequences that integrate into our broader structures of meaning (Ricoeur, "Oneself as Another" 198). This is why a parallel scenario of suggestions and implications will be addressed in this research. Refiguration, the third part of the narration process, is the stepping back phase through a mediation that transforms *seeing as* to *being as* allowing the experience to be a reflection on one's own world. Hence, agency starts with the individual identifying with a narrative in order to constitute a sense of (illusory) self (Alakhdar 29). In his "On Interpretation", Ricoeur posits that "to interpret is to explicate a sort of being-in-the world" (19).

Narrative identity theory shows that narration involves ethics via intention and interpretation. Ricoeur emphasizes the *evaluations, estimations and value judgments* entailed in narration and how this becomes foundational for *ethics proper* (qtd in Mazloun 268). Mazloun, in her "The Power of Narrative", insists that an involvement of the self and the other in interaction necessarily contributes to ethical development for the reader (268). The notion that narration constructs identity as well as enables meaningful and liberating selves to develop foregrounds the role of intention, cultural context, and temporal coherence that lead to thematic coherence, and thus, the construction of identity via narration (McAdams 110-3).

Methods

For the purpose of the current study, we obtained human subject research approval from the Review Board of one of our institutions before interviewing stakeholders. We interviewed students, faculty, and administrative staff for this project. We use the term *administrators* to refer to faculty members who have administrative and leadership roles as well as teaching and research responsibilities, while we use *staff* to refer to those with no teaching responsibilities and whose roles are restricted to assistance and coordination, and in most cases, do not belong to higher management. It should be noted that many of our respondents were reluctant to speak with us for various reasons. Some were willing to speak with us, but they asked us to refrain from using their names or mentioning their university affiliations.

We hoped that through narration of past events, interviews might help us understand the lived experience that our participants had with the phenomenon. In search of those individuals who had experienced such an impact from the phenomenon in question, we considered several groups but ultimately settled on people involved in the aftermath of one executive order in particular. Executive Order #14169—“Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid” (The White House) led to, among other things, the abrupt cessation of the funding provided through USAID to students and universities in Egypt.

Having found a group that was accessible to our team, as three of us live and work in Egypt, we then set about drafting questions based on our own experiences in academia. We determined that this insider perspective would be an asset. While we agreed that objectivity has to be maintained, managed, and respected, we also agreed that “being inside can bring huge benefits in terms of the ability to uncover meaning” (Dibley et al. 73). We shared our questions with one another and normalized them to reflect some cultural sensitivity, academic usefulness, and satisfaction of our own interests. We also agreed that these interview questions might need to be delivered in a paraphrased way to best honor the experiences and reflections of the participants. The interviews were conducted in English and/or in Arabic by speakers of English and Arabic with participants who were also speakers of both Arabic and English. The interviewees were permitted to switch languages (mainly English and Arabic) for the purposes of question clarification.

With some participants willing to relate their experiences but unwilling to be recorded, the interviews were conducted face-to-face and via video conferences. Transcripts were created for the recorded interviews, and field notes were taken for those interviews where the participants did not wish to be recorded. Understanding the importance of dwelling with our data even in a shorter timeline for drafting and revising the findings, we continued to dwell with the collected data through our drafting and revision process right up to the final revision due date. We understand that dwelling with the data means “pondering, wondering, and asking questions of meaning that resonate with us with each story” (Dibley et al. 125). It was important to us to reason deeper than merely cataloging the similarities and differences in the responses to our questions, so we resisted the urge to quantify the responses and instead looked for the shared components of the experiences of the participants in breadth of complication, common language in the story of the participants’ experience, and depth of emotion in their responses both then and now in hindsight.

We interviewed 23 participants. We interviewed seven Faculty members, five Staff and Administrators, and eleven Students. All were directly affected by the abrupt cessation of funding, and all lived, worked, or attended classes at various universities and colleges in Egypt. We divided the labor of writing the results section among the team by participant group and then read each other's work to normalize our assessments and interpretations of responses.

We reviewed the transcripts of the interviews, sorting them into general topical categories based on our own experiences in academic labor, and then shared our interpretations and categorizations of the transcripts in an online group setting. We did not intend to quantify this data and so did not perform categorical hit counts nor sought interrater reliability as we interpreted the data and normalized it in conversations and by consensus. The following

Results sections represent the interview responses organized by the prevalent themes we saw emerge in the responses from all three stakeholder groups.

Results

The stories shared with us develop a narrative that constructs meaning and shapes the identities of those involved in the story. That narrative also constructs their world for their readers. The phenomenon of experiencing such a moment as this in a very particular way shapes that collective story and narrative identity theory highlights the following themes in our investigation. The data derived from the three groups of stakeholders yielded these common themes, experienced individually as they experienced the phenomenon collectively. The results will be presented under the following themes:

- Loss of opportunities and uncertainty about the future
- Inequalities and exclusion
- Emotional and psychological toll
- Standing in solidarity
- Institutional and policy responses

Loss of Opportunities and Uncertainty about the Future

Plans were disrupted for all stakeholders. Faculty and staff and administrators lost job opportunities. Some students lost access to dorms and stipend payments. Others lost professional development opportunities, such as leadership and entrepreneurship camps and study-abroad opportunities. For some, the situation was even worse as they were denied the opportunity to enroll in another good-quality program. They all expressed a deep sense of uncertainty about what the future now holds for them.

On January 26, many of the interviewed students were attending a USAID-sponsored camp when, unexpectedly, their instructors interrupted the day's activity and asked everyone to stop what they were doing for an emergency meeting. Whether attending the camp, doing other activities, or simply staying at the dorms or homes on that day, they were informed of the U.S. President's order to suspend the USAID programs for three months, which was then followed by another order of full termination.

When we asked participants to describe their experience from the day the USAID was blocked by executive orders, students shared similar experiences. Recalling what happened and reporting their experience, students have expressed a sense of "*fear*," "*anxiety*," and "*uncertainty*." They are anxious that their academic plans have been disrupted in one way or another. Some of them do not know what is yet to come, and whether or not they will be able to finish their studies after the sudden loss of USAID funding. Moreover, for some groups of students, the suspension of the USAID has denied them access to different educational and professional development opportunities, such as leadership and entrepreneurship camps, internships in international companies, and partial study-abroad opportunities, as they relied entirely on the scholarships offered by the USAID and had no alternative means to pay tuition and living expenses. This, in turn, will not only affect their education but also threaten their

aspiration and professional growth. What's more, the experience of some of the students was even worse. Some USAID students were not officially enrolled in the respective educational institutions at the time the executive orders were announced. They had only received their scholarship acceptance letters and had started different preparation programs, including the study of academic English and liberal arts in preparation for the initiation of their academic journeys. For that group of students, the suspension has abruptly and entirely cut off their access to higher education to the extent that many of them had to have a gap year. A visually impaired student reported that she had to spend the 2025 academic year at home after she was promised a prominent educational opportunity with living and medical support due to the suspension of the USAID program that had initially offered her a scholarship and all types of support she could ever need.

“*A deep sense of uncertainty*” about what the future holds was another experience that many students have reported. Those students had gone through a rigorous selection process and were recognized as top-notch amongst their peers to receive scholarships in reputable national and international institutions. Now, they do not know what will happen next and whether or not they will be able to finish their studies. They are already enrolled in some of the best educational programs, which, unfortunately, they cannot fund on their own. These students range from freshmen to graduating seniors, but they all still do not know who will cover their study fees till they graduate; in other words, they do not know what the future holds for them, and their world is full of uncertainty.

The situation was no different in this regard for faculty members. Their stories were quite similar among the participants in the faculty grouping. They all generally describe receiving a phone call in the middle of class from an administrative person that informed them of the U.S. President’s executive order that sought to stop USAID funds—these funds were already allocated in a previous budget by Congress—and that they must stop classes and send their students to an assembly where they would be told what was happening together. Some were told not to discuss the event with students, just to send them away.

One representative story showed some of the trust issues and emotional distress that were collectively experienced when they said, “*it was so unfair for me and my students. Um, you know, to stop... at least allow us some time to wrap up, or... You know, give us some explanations for that.*” The suddenness of the event seemed to be noteworthy across participant responses, but it did not end with simply sending the students away. One faculty member reported humiliation at having to add to the students’ stress when they asked if they could leave their things behind while they went to the impromptu student assembly, where they would be told they had to leave campus. It caused distress for the faculty member to reply that the students must take all of their things with them. Another faculty member reports how the care work they did extended well beyond the classroom when they told us, “*The main problem for me was not... well, not only Um, what happened by ending classes and all that, but also taking the students out of the dorms. And uh... and telling them to go back to their, uh... to their towns, this was very debilitating, and it was very humiliating.*”

The faculty’s dedication to students was also apparent in the following reply when asked how the situation could have been handled differently: “*Maybe they could have told us. You can go along with this thing, you're not gonna be rewarded for it and it's your choice. I think*

this would have been something that most of us would have agreed to, we would have gone along and finished.”

There were even some faculty who had repeat students with whom they were still engaged in leftover communication apps or media from previous classes. These students reached out and contacted their teachers after the assembly to request help and support, with logistics and getting back home, as they were not going to be allowed to stay in their accommodations that were contracted through USAID. This added to the psychological toll the faculty endured during that time.

The toll was not only psychological but also financial. There was a matter of uncompensated labor, as one faculty member reported, *“They called us, and they told us that we have to finish all the paperwork. Till... till maximum noon. I mean, this was... I remember, as I recall, it was at 8:30, maybe 9? Then we have to finish everything before noon.”* Even in the face of such an unusual circumstance, higher intensity labor was extracted from the faculty before the money ran out.

When it comes to staff and administrators, *“Sadness,” “shock,”* and *“frustration”* were some of the recurrent words they used to describe their experience the day the USAID was suspended. Some were in the middle of a winter camp; others had started the first day of classes when they received the news that they needed *“to stop immediately”* and notify the students that the program had been suspended for three months pending review. The frustration did not just stem from the fact that they had worked so hard to design the curriculum, putting in as many as four to five hours a day between meetings and material development, but also because they were there to witness the dreams of their students shatter. They reported that the students who join the USAID programs are handpicked for their competence and drive; some of them study at Egyptian universities; others are enrolled in private universities, and the administrative faculty emphasized that they were some of the brightest students in Egypt. They had worked so hard to get where they were to have that dream snatched away from them. What made it worse was the uncertainty of the whole situation. No one was telling them anything; no one was sure what was happening and whether the suspension was temporary. The staff and many administrators were not sure how to reassure the students, some of whom had already received the email about the suspension of the program before their respective programs had a chance to relay the news to them and started asking questions, to which the administration still had no answer.

One administrator sadly recalls how, as they were getting ready to assemble the students in one place and have the USAID team gently break the news to them and explain what was happening, the students had already read the emails about the suspension of their scholarships and all the activities related to them. She reported that she and other administrators were able to notice how the decision immediately divided the students into groups: those who still kept the faith that this would be temporary and that the programs would be up and running again in three months, and those who believed that this was permanent, a fear that was confirmed when they were asked to pack up and leave their respective dorms within the next couple of days.

Another administrator shared how the suspension of the program put things in perspective. She realized how *“privileged”* she was compared to other administrators and staff members. Although she was no longer sure she would be able to afford the PhD program in Europe she

had been saving for, she felt lucky she still had her own business to fall back on. What happened prompted her to think it was time to focus on her brand, and that she was lucky she did not have a family to provide for, like her coworkers. She has still not given up hope and is waiting for a *“miracle to happen”* yet cannot help but feel it is *“liberating not to be fully dependent on USAID”*. If USAID remains contingent upon “Egypt’s stance on the Palestinian situation”, then she believes that it is time for Egypt to become independent.

When asked about what they wished the response could have looked like, most stakeholders firmly believed that the situation could have been handled differently. Students wished the situation were handled with *“more transparency.”* For example, some students have indicated that their universities did not issue any official statements nor sent any emails to explain the situation after the suspension of USAID. They wish there were clear and timely communications from both the government, mainly the Ministry of Higher Education, academic institutions, and the USAID office, with immediate guidance and an alternative plan for the affected students. Some were also hoping for psychological support to help them cope with the stress and uncertainty caused by such a plight.

The responses of faculty members were slightly different. On the one hand, some faculty members reported that the situation should have been handled in a *“more diplomatic”* and *“more humanized”* manner, elaborating that institutions, especially those that had programs already running *“could have waited till the end of the day”* or *“in the break between the sessions”* to break the bad news, instead of asking faculty to *“immediately”* suspend all activities and leave their classrooms. Some even expressed their willingness to continue to teach had they been given the choice, even if they were *“not gonna be rewarded for it”*. Others believed that more time was needed to *“prepare the students emotionally”* to deal with this news. On the other hand, others believed that academic institutions *“might not have been able to respond ... differently”* although they wish students were given the chance to finish what they had started.

Although they did not always know exactly what the response could have looked like, the staff and administrators interviewed shared unanimously that it could have been handled differently; they believed the stakeholders could have come together to come up with alternatives and *“should have tried to think of ways to support the affected students and communicate the news in a more appropriate manner, just to mitigate the negative impact on the students. If they really care about their well-being.”* One wished the program had been more selective when it came to the cohort whose scholarships were terminated. She further elaborated that she could understand that, not being enrolled in a university yet, the gap-year students might be denied the opportunity to stay in the program, a different fate should have awaited the twelve gap-year students who were only one step away from admission to their universities; however, they could have at least been given the chance to complete the program.

Transparency would have also helped mitigate the impact of the orders. One confided that despite being promised a three-month paid leave until further notice, which was honored by some institutions, they were later notified over the weekend that they would only receive their basic salary.

When asked how they felt about the executive orders back then, all stakeholders shared similar feelings. “Shocked,” “overwhelmed,” “upset,” “heartbroken,” “traumatized,” “lost,”

and even “betrayed,” were some of the feelings the affected students had in response to the USAID suspension. Many of the students felt deep despair seeing all their dreams of having a good education and traveling to new countries suddenly slip away, which also heightened a lot of negative emotions such as frustration, “depression,” “fear,” “deep disappointment,” “insecurity,” and “uncertainty.” These intense emotional responses were intensified by their uncertainty about their future, which in turn heightened their anxiety and “stress.”

“Sad,” “angry,” “upset,” “disappointed,” “frustration,” and “anxiety” captured the sentiments shared by the faculty interviewed back when the news was first delivered to them. These programs sponsored students who were motivated, hardworking, and eager to learn to make something of themselves; they were simply “a breath of fresh air”. So, they felt it was “unjustified” to be “destroying their future.” One faculty member thought it was reminiscent of “corporate”-like layoffs in private enterprises.

“Shocking,” “disappointing,” “confusing,” and “heartbreaking” were but some of the words the staff and administrators used to describe how they felt about the executive orders back in January 2025. Although they came as no surprise to a few who had earlier heard that the USAID activities were being looked into, they “never imagined it would be retroactive, or that it would affect funding that was already committed”. Not only were the staff and administrators worried about their own employment prospects, but they also mostly felt sorry for the students who had to deal with what they could only describe as a “crisis” that denied them an opportunity they had been working toward for years.

The stakeholders’ views on what happened back then, how they wished it could have been handled differently, and how they felt during that difficult time articulate the loss of different opportunities and their uncertainty about the future.

Inequalities and Exclusion

The different USAID programs in Egypt selected students with educational excellence who came from low-income backgrounds and/or who needed extra support due to specific disabilities and disadvantages. The programs offered accessible and inclusive educational opportunities that they would not have experienced on their own. With the suspension of these programs, those students have been denied access to good quality education, which exacerbates the existing inequalities they already endured. For staff, administrators, and faculty, inequality took on a whole new meaning in the way some were compensated and paid their basic salary while others received nothing at all.

The USAID programs were perceived by many as an amendment of socio-economic inequality. When asked about how the executive orders impacted their lives, many students used a dream metaphor to share their experience. “All my dreams are taken away”– indicating how “one order” “by one man” has shattered all their dreams for a better future. Some of them reported that they had to give up other educational opportunities and scholarships which, as they said, was “a tough choice,” in order to accept the USAID scholarship as they believed that USAID would provide a vast array of educational and professional development opportunities, not just a degree. Now they “have lost everything.” However, they have also expressed that such an experience has taught them a valuable lesson on the importance of independence and self-growth. Many of them said they have started searching for jobs to be

able to cover their university fees and living expenses. The learned self-reliance, however, cannot, at present, repair the damage to their socio-economic position in society, nor can it repair the self-image they had been crafting for themselves as fortunate and high-achieving students. The pulling back of these hard-won funds has introduced a possibility for distrust and a self-image of victimhood.

The faculty had a somewhat different experience. For some, there was job loss. For all of them, there were lost wages as the jobs they had secured evaporated with a pen stroke. There are other, less-obvious effects as well. While the mental and emotional distress is quite prominent in the faculty responses, less obvious are the experiences of betrayal and lingering distrust they learned during the phenomena. Since actions and their effects often imprint on those affected in such a way that they will view the identity of the one that disappointed them differently—sometimes permanently, and sometimes until trust is reestablished—we cannot yet know the full extent of the damage to the reputation of USAID as an organization or even to the projected image of the United States as a nation.

Another hidden cost one faculty member mentioned involved reserving the time to teach the course and refrained from going on a vacation. This state of commitment to the job and then having that commitment canceled seems to leave a sense of vulnerability and abandonment for the faculty on the receiving end. On the surface, this may seem like a minor inconvenience, but our experience as academic laborers tells us that contracting with an institution, for any length of time, can often be an all-consuming commitment. We dedicate our time, attention, presence, intellect, and organizational skill to that context. Having that dedication rewarded with a rescinded offer after the commitment was made seems like a betrayal that echoes like a slamming door.

In addition to their felt losses, the thread of concern for others was common among faculty respondents. One particular faculty member stated that she was concerned most about the students and employees “*who have been working with the aid for, I think, since the seventies or eighties, or something like that [...] these people who have children at schools, who have homes to run. This is terrible.*”

The life of the staff and administrators was also impacted by the executive orders. For those who had lost their jobs as a result, the financial impact was undeniable, especially when they had held their positions for over 20 years. As full-timers, their jobs were their livelihoods, and they were not all fortunate enough to find employment elsewhere post USAID suspension. Only one reported that they were happy they managed to go back to teaching in an institution whose support she could count on. It especially took an emotional toll on those who were no longer able to support their families.

One faculty member made an analogy of the program as life-giving water in response to our question, by saying it was “*a cup of water in the middle of the desert*” to the otherwise marginalized students that USAID-funded scholarships empowered. The scholarships were life-changing for students in developing countries in the sense that they prepared them for the competitive job market, which is why she felt “*confused*” and “*let down*” when they were suspended, and such a wellspring dried up.

The words “*disappointed*” and “*frustrated*” used by faculty and students alike were reiterated by the interviewed staff and administrators, who lamented the uncertainty of the

future of the program. Questions arose about the timing of the executive orders as well; although they could be persuaded to understand that the program would no longer be running or admitting a new cohort, they failed to understand why students who were already enrolled in their respective USAID-funded programs would be affected. Only one participant found a silver lining; although he had been job hunting since the suspension of the program, he decided to also use this time to reflect, regroup, and reassess his personal and professional goals.

Emotional and Psychological Toll

The three stakeholder groups involved in this study expressed common feelings of distress and disappointment. However, the intensity of the emotional toll was highest for students since they were the ones most critically affected. Emotional and psychological discomfort and trauma seemed to grow from their deep sense of despair and uncertainty about their future, which was also reported by some of the faculty, staff, and administrators. Emotional contagion was a finding the researchers did not anticipate. The emotional and psychological toll the various stakeholders communicated during the interviews was passed on to the interviewers and researchers in this current study. Listening to students' experiences was painful and emotionally draining. Each story carried a weight that lingered long after the interview ended, which made us realize how challenging it is to bear witness to such hardships.

When we asked students about their feelings in response to the USAID suspension, they reported terms such as “*shocked*,” “*overwhelmed*,” “*upset*,” “*heartbroken*,” “*traumatized*,” “*lost*,” and even “*betrayed*.” Many of the students felt deep despair seeing all their dreams of having a good education and traveling to new countries suddenly slip away, which also heightened a lot of negative emotions such as frustration, “*depression*,” “*fear*,” and “*deep disappointment*.” Faculty members voiced emotions such as “*sad*,” “*angry*,” “*upset*,” “*disappointed*,” “*frustration*,” and “*anxiety*.” The faculty felt deeply for their students who were being affected by the situation. These programs sponsored students who were motivated, hard-working, and eager to learn to make something of themselves; they were simply “*a breath of fresh air*.” For the staff and administrators, who cited terms like “*shocking*,” “*disappointing*,” “*confusing*,” and “*heartbreaking*,” the feelings were similar. Although the news came as no surprise to a few who had earlier heard that the USAID activities were being looked into, they “*never imagined it would be retroactive, or that it would affect funding that was already committed*.”

Looking back on the ordeal months later, some students reported that their feelings have not changed much, while others indicated that the situation has made them “*stronger*” and more “*resilient*.” They indicated that this plight changed their perspectives and taught them a valuable lesson, which is to expect the unexpected. They were learning resilience. With that in mind, now they feel prepared to face anything. As for the students who expressed a change in their feelings, they indicated that “*time*” played an important role in alleviating their pain. Other students cited the “*support*” they received from their “*institutions*” and “*peers*” as the cause for change and admitted that they might be luckier than some of their peers, whose status as a new cohort, not fully admitted to a specific academic institution, has denied them a similar experience. It must be noted, however, that our selection of participants was limited by the

very phenomenon we were investigating, as the executive orders themselves sent many of the potential participants away.

The faculty also reported, in retrospect, that they still held the same feelings that they felt initially when they had heard the news about the suspension of the USAID program; however, the views of staff and administrators diverged within that participant group. Some administrators did not experience any change of heart about the executive orders, but others, after a few months had elapsed, managed to gain new perspectives, and came to believe that this may have been a blessing in disguise. These administrators attributed their change of heart to the political turmoil the world was in. In one case, this led a participant to believe that it “*might be better for our country, [...] from a political perspective*” since, as she said: “*any aids are political, and they give an upper hand to the US*” and “*they don’t have control over us anymore. Financial control, I mean.*” In another case, it was thanks to newfound spirituality that led the participant to believe in the power of signs as their reason for change. If anything, this was a sign for her to slow down and realize how blessed she was to be able to support herself and not have as many financial obligations as her coworkers. It was time for her to embrace change, do some soul searching, reprioritize her goals, and practice self-care.

When asked about what concerns they had now that they did not have before the executive orders, some students expressed their concern about “*how political decisions can unexpectedly affect the lives of students*”, especially those from low-income backgrounds, and had once thought of the AID as a dream come true. Some even came to the realization that “*political changes*” in one place in the world may have negative effects on individuals in another. The U.S. presidential decision to suspend the USAID, for example, has impacted the lives of millions of individuals across different countries. These new political orders have raised the affected students’ concerns about the future, especially regarding the funding of their education. Even if all institutions have announced their coverage of the fees for the current academic year (2025), nothing has been announced in regards to the upcoming academic years.

Faculty member responses enfolded two general themes that were echoed across the stakeholder group: concern for students and peers and concern for job security/financial stability. Several also expressed concern for repeated instances of this sort of discontinuation of programs.

In addition to their socio-economic standing, one major concern for staff and administrators was the uncertainty about the “*continuity*” and “*stability*” of any program or international partnership they might be affiliated with, which happened to be a sentiment shared by many of the students in the program as well. They admitted that the discontinuation of the program gave them a perpetual sense of life’s precarity; nothing was to be taken for granted, and no entity was to be trusted. It served as a constant reminder that they were never “*safe*” from the unexpected twists of fate. Some students went so far as to warn their followers on social media against letting their guard down, reminding them that even if they were “*accepted to a scholarship, please don’t be happy. This doesn’t mean anything, because at any time you could be expelled.*” This reaction reflects the stresses brought about by the experience of dealing with sustained instability.

When asked about memorable experiences or common stories stakeholders heard about from this event, our respondents offered several examples, some of which seemed to be

experienced in similar ways. A poignant memory that many students recall is the dismissal of a group of students affiliated to a specific USAID program from the dorms of one of the educational institutions. The sight of expelled students carrying their luggage and chanting sad songs lamenting their tough situation was heartrending for many of the interviewees. It seemed analogous to many of the forced relocations that the world has witnessed, but on a smaller, localized scale, which made it emotionally evocative for the respondents.

For Faculty, some of the lingering memories the respondents recalled in the interviews were about the moment the news was delivered to the students. One respondent *“can still visualize how students were walking in huge numbers to the auditorium”* where they were told that the scholarship was suspended. This respondent recalled that she could not hold back the tears, especially when she heard them asking each other, *“What are we gonna do?”* This is when she really felt *“humiliated”* because the Egyptian students in these programs were top-notch students; they were *“eager to learn”* and had *“left their homes and their families to come here and stay on their own, to learn.”*

She was not alone here; etched in the memory of many are the reactions of the students as they were relayed the news that the program was suspended pending further notice. Their vacant expressions said it all. This was life-changing, and not in the positive sense of the word. It was catastrophic. It was not just about the bootcamps or courses they were enrolled in. This was about their whole lives; *“it had a major impact on everything.”* Their whole lives revolved around their respective scholarships, as evident in the online reels posted by the students. These students had special potential and invested in themselves, and now, in recounting that memory, some of the faculty felt a sense of sadness for them, with a hint of helplessness.

The messages some respondents later received from students after they learned that the program had been officially terminated made it all the more *“depressing”*. It was *“heartbreaking”* to hear them crying when they *“did not know what to do for them. Um... I... I mean, there isn't any time in my whole life I felt so helpless.”*

The faculty emphasized that it was not only students who were impacted by the executive orders; faculty, staff, and administrators suffered their fair share of hardship as well. A faculty recalled an email from a program manager a few days later in which she was *“bidding us farewell because she no longer had a job and she was going out in search of something to do for her life.”* This respondent saw this as a *“very direct effect on non-students,”* mainly staff and administrators in the different USAID programs.

One of the most heartbreaking images that one administrator is still unable to shake off, is that of the students who were suddenly out on the streets after being asked by their respective institutions to immediately vacate their dorm rooms because *“you're not belonging here anymore. The university is not paying for your, like, the dorms.”* Among them was a disabled student whose accommodation and medical expenses—including a companion nurse—had been covered by the USAID program. She suddenly found herself returning to her rural hometown because her university could only afford to cover her tuition but not the accommodation or medical expenses.

There was also another visually impaired student who masked his frustration by reassuring his teachers that the program students were all resilient enough to bounce back from this. The administrator was proud that her university was one of the few in Egypt which not only

admitted but also empowered students with special needs. However, the dismissal of special needs students for financial reasons beyond their own control is distressing enough. The fact that some of them were among the top students in the program made these dismissals even more distressing.

Standing in Solidarity and Navigating Program Cancellation Challenges

The support that students provided for each other played a crucial role in navigating the challenges posed by the termination of the USAID program, and the support they received from faculty, staff, administrators, and academic institutions gave them hope that someone would always have their back. The sense of solidarity was also manifested in the staff's sharing job opportunities with each other and the faculty's willingness to continue working with the students even without compensation.

The interviews showed how the affected students managed to stand in solidarity with one another, checking on each other, and offering help to those in need. After the USAID program was terminated, the students continued to support each other by “staying connected, sharing any useful updates or opportunities ... and simply listening to one another”. They also created WhatsApp groups to share information and job opportunities.

For faculty members, who continued to listen and validate each other's feelings, and offer words of encouragement about the future, it was moral and emotional support that they had to offer one another. Some staff, especially those outside higher management, took this support a step further by sharing employment and networking opportunities with each other.

It was these acts of solidarity that the participants highlighted as the positive outcome of this experience. Indeed, students reported that they received support from both their instructors and peers. They praised how some of their fellow students shared stories on social media and tried to contact USAID personnel, while others tried to contact the Egyptian authorities. Some of them also reported that one USAID student reached out to a famous Egyptian TV show host and appeared on her show to make sure the voices of those affected by the presidential orders were heard on the national level, and many of our interviewees believed that the publication of this paper could do the same, only on an international level, which is why many of them chose to participate in this study. The most important lesson for some students, however, was that the instability helped them to realize that opportunities might come and go, while strength will always come from within.

The interviews of staff, administrators, and faculty again offered a different perspective. While one faculty member failed to recall anything positive about this experience, many others celebrated the fact that the students' respective institutions covered their tuition fees at least for another semester. They were also happy to see many faculty members willing to teach their students (post-suspension) without compensation. And most importantly, it was refreshing to see friendships between faculty and students blossom. Indeed, faculty continued to mentor and emotionally support their students even months after the termination of the program. One faculty member, in particular, was praised for raising awareness about the abandoned students when she read “*negative comments from people who didn't understand what they are going through, and they were like, oh, don't bore us with your situation. It's not the end of the world. And some people were saying, like, Why are you studying in America?*” Upon seeing such viral

posts openly disparaging the impacted students and shaming them for choosing to be affiliated with US-funded programs (and later crying over the elusive opportunity), said faculty took to social media to tell their side of the story and document what had happened to the students and their families, explaining why they deserved empathy, not contempt.

Other faculty were also acknowledged for lending an ear to students who needed to vent; they were happy to comfort the students as they poured out their frustration for hours on end. They “*were receiving calls from students who were crying and who ... just wanted to talk to someone, and we were always open to answer and to respond to their calls, and just to tell them that who knows? Maybe this is the best for them.*” The empathy they showed for their students was natural in our estimation, in part, because of the suffering the faculty also shared in that moment.

Still, for others, this phenomenon was seen as a learning moment, a time of reflection and gratitude. Although the termination of the program had spelled the end of her dream to pursue a PhD abroad, one respondent believed that there were moments when we just had to “*respect God’s timing*” and realize that no matter how much time we spend planning our future, something unexpected might come along and derail our plans--the way COVID did. So, she learned to just sit back, relax, and appreciate the smaller things in life. Still, other reflective responses characterized the moment as a time to learn how to think strategically, manage crises, allocate resources, and support students, staff, administrators, and faculty. It served as a persistent reminder that we need to “*expect the unexpected*” as long as we live in a world where anything that happens--be it natural or political--will impact us.

Some reflection turned to insight, which was made evident when we asked respondents to share their current status and outlook since the executive orders were levied. Some participants, including faculty, staff, administrators, and students, indicated that now is the time to break free from the USAID trap. Advocacy and supporting others in similar situations have become an essential part of responding to the USAID suspension phenomenon. Another point that was discussed by many of the interviewees was the legality of the presidential order. Funding offered by USAID has always been regarded as a generous contribution by the American people and government to the international community; however, many saw this commitment as a binding act that should not have been rescinded retroactively. Even if the President of the U.S. sees that the cancellation of USAID serves the interests of his country, it would have been more appropriate to implement such a decision proactively rather than retroactively.

Institutional and Policy Responses

Institutions responded differently from one another. While some students felt supported, others were completely abandoned. The commonality was that no immediate action was taken to address the suspension announcement. Governmental interference was a driving force for institutions to take an action that served the interests of some, and not all, affected students. Some faculty, staff, and administrators were also not compensated.

Some students reported that their institutions showed “empathy and concern.” Still, no immediate action was taken to address the suspension announcement. Only later, specifically after a call for a meeting with the Egyptian Minister of Higher Education and upon his Excellency’s recommendations, did many institutions decide to fund the education of the

USAID scholarship students who were already enrolled in their academic programs. However, many students did not receive similar support simply because they were only accepted but not yet enrolled in their academic institutions.

The faculty reported that the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, in the days after the executive order announcement, came together and made arrangements to support the universities so that the following semester could be completed by students who had scholarships that were affected by the executive order. Faculty at some institutions also reported that they were asked not to speak outside of the university about what had happened. Even many of those who anonymously participated in this study were still not permitted to name their institutions or offer identifying information.

The administrators suspected that their respective institutions might have known neither how to handle the situation nor what to relay to the students, which resulted in minimal communication with said students, if at all. Some reported that the only communication was via a “*very professional, very official*” email that was sent to document the status quo— a condition of which the administrators (in our study, faculty with extra administrative positions) were already well aware. Still, they considered themselves lucky, since they were given a paid three-month leave until further notice, while the students were not as fortunate. The gap-year students—who were not officially enrolled in the university yet—were let go and informed that they were “*not part of the university anymore. Do whatever you want to do with your lives.*” The students who *were* enrolled in the university, on the other hand, were given one semester to find a sponsor—all expenses covered by the university—but that was “*after much pressure from other universities*” and the Ministry of Education. One could not help but notice the dilatoriness of some universities in making decisions and addressing the needs and concerns of the students and staff. It “*took more than double the time*” that it took other universities to decide what they would do with the enrolled and gap-year students and afflicted staff and administrators.

Recommendations

The participants offered recommendations, and we constructed other recommendations from among their responses, as they reflected on their experiences and refigured their approaches based on their experiences.

When asked about what can be done to ameliorate the impact of the USAID suspension, students’ first recommendation was to have a contingency plan, especially after realizing how “*vulnerable*” such AID programs could be. Locating “*alternative funding options*” was another proposed solution by students, some of whom suggested that the Ministry of Higher Education should have an “*emergency fund*” to provide support during any unexpected hardships, while others called for the support of Egyptian businessmen to step in and fill the void left by the withdrawn USAID funding. Students also recommended the provision of “*emotional support*” should a similar situation arise. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of maintaining clearer and quicker communications between stakeholders and institutions, to avoid “*fear*” and “*misinformation,*” and a unified nationwide response, arguing that all educational institutions should address such a crisis in a consistent manner to ensure equality and the inclusion of all affected students.

The recommendations from faculty were quite similar. The need for autonomy and a more efficient switch to crisis management mode, including a contingency plan, were the two main recommendations made by the faculty interviewed. They regretted that the response to the executive orders was retroactive when we should have had our own AID-like programs that sponsor distinguished students—and in some cases, Arab and African students as well—in our private and national universities. If this crisis has taught them something, it is that USAID is not “*reliable*.” Faculty members called for the instant provision of businessmen-funded national scholarship programs so that host universities are able to “*transfer all these students to this scholarship*.” Another faculty member also noted that all affected deserve to know the fate that awaits them without having to wait 90 more days.

The administrators interviewed also had the following recommendations to make: On the governmental level, foreign funds—be they American, European, German, or Chinese—must be understood to come with their own agenda and conditions. Therefore, funding models and sponsor policies should be revisited to ensure less reliance on said funds. On the institutional level, the staff/administrative faculty interviewed acknowledged the need “*to be agile enough to continue to grow and develop*” in the face of adversity. In the unpredictable times we live in, they believed all stakeholders alike needed to “*always be ready for unexpected change*” in policy or funding. Mental health services for the affected students to help them navigate through these uncertain times and build resilience were also called for. Networking opportunities for full-time staff/administrative faculty who had lost their full-time jobs were proposed as well.

One salient recommendation made by the administrative staff was “*fundraising*,” and not just on the institutional level, so that all groups of students—graduate and gap-year included—get to keep their scholarships. Just like the students and faculty members, nationwide fundraisers as a contingency plan, preferably before the interest in the cause fades, were proposed by administrative staff who believed in the power of nationalist businessmen to rise to the occasion.

Discussion

Interviewing the participants made an experience of phenomenology possible for it created space for stepping back and reflection. According to narrative identity theory, agency was maintained through the phases of preconfiguration, configuration, and reconfiguration.

The collective mediation and then interpretation of their experiences gave all stakeholders agency in highlighting lessons to be considered. First, the narratives in their collective led to “benevolent spontaneity” which Ricoeur (1984) calls “empathy.” Agency to reflect showed them that they wish to avoid similar situations in the future. “*A contingency plan*,” for them, as reported in the data, meant businessmen creating a buffer fund, or government intervention, or even institutional policy to maintain the service. Sharing the individual experiences of stakeholders created a narrative web of individual perspectives from shared experiences, which then collapsed to offer similar suggestions to avoid future pain. The disruption that the executive orders created for academics and researchers revealed a lack of clear and timely communication between stakeholders and institutions, with implications of loss of agency and transparency.

Narrative identity theory reveals that the process of reading these experiences becomes an ethical reflection. It highlights the lack of emotional support, through and after the crisis, creating an ethical choice for readers to suggest emotional support as one of the leading lessons in this experience, because it cuts through the noise of “*fear*” and “*misinformation*.”

An interesting narrative detail is the act of questioning the legality of USAID cessation. The emotional damage it inflicted calls for an equally intense answer of support from all nations for “*a unified response*.” The individual experiences yielded, through narration, a common call for “*equality and inclusion*,” which are, ironically, traditionally American ideals.

Coupling phenomenology with narrative identity theory allowed for deeper consideration of the phases of meaning-creation through narrating individual experiences during interviews and showing collective concerns, meaning, and agency.

Call for Support and Advocacy

Most interviewed stakeholders commented on the financial fragility of academic/research institutions in developing countries and the suspension of scholarships, indicating that what happened is a wake-up call to break free from the *AID trap* and the hegemony of the Capitalist West and find alternative funding options.

Advocacy and supporting others, in similar situations, has become an essential part of responding to the USAID suspension phenomenon. The USAID programs provided underprivileged students and marginalized/underrepresented groups— such as girls and students with disabilities—access to good quality education, which promoted equity, social mobility, and inclusivity. Now is the time for societies and governments to help promote these principles without depending on any external aid. Many of the interviewees questioned the legality of the presidential order and suggested that it would have been more appropriate to implement such a decision proactively rather than retroactively. To answer the questions of legality and to implement better strategies in the face of adversities, international assistance and cooperation may be necessary.

On a personal level, sharing the stories and experiences from the USAID program funding termination opened the door for the investigation of the narrative, both individually and collectively, for commonalities worthy of phenomenological study and invited us, as researchers and academics, to reflect on the experience and interpret its implications.

Conclusion

It is clear in these interviews that the faculty and the administrative staff derive much of their professional identities from the relationships they have with the students they teach. Their own pain and suffering was often phrased in terms of sadness for their students, or being worried *about* their students. They experienced guilt and shame in holding information back from their students on the day of the event. They even acted on their students’ behalf in many cases to exercise care and emotional support and in some cases to arrange and provide for students physical, security, communication, and informational needs after the fact.

The USAID was clearly a *Public Good*. The US Higher Education system originally founded Public universities and colleges as a Public Good so that education would not be a privilege of only the wealthy but accessible to all. USAID, in part extended this idea

internationally invoking its status as a public good. Corporate America hated this extension and saw it only as a negative on the budget balance sheet not accounting for the humanity those funds touched. Egyptian Higher Ed seems to be in a position, with regard to funding, similar to the position that American Higher Ed was in about 20-30 years ago when the slow slashing of funding began and it continued until this day. American Public Higher Ed could metaphorically be seen as the frog in the pot that is slowly raised to a boil, whereas the USAID cut off just threw the “Egyptian-education-funding-frog” directly into an already boiling pot. The change is much more perceptible and will likely cause pain and suffering to that frog as it leaps out of its predicament. But what of the slow death of the first frog? It may be that this instance could spur a push both in the U.S. and internationally to argue for education as a common good that cannot be used as a political bargaining chip nor be monetized for profit, at least in the public sector. Private universities are needed, of course, but the reason for the creation of public universities was to raise up excellent citizens in a middle class that would be more equipped to meet the challenges of a new age. As we enter another new age, perhaps it is time to demand a different funding model that supports those excellent goals now in this time of new challenges. We can all learn from the suggestions that our participants made after reflecting on their own experiences. We can also learn things about ourselves by comparing their experiences and perspectives to our own. One might even argue that it takes a shocking example like this one to call these larger questions to the foreground. One question that is certainly implied here is whether these reflections and experiences are shared in isolation or if they are indeed a small part of a larger narrative.

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Organizing in East Texas: Graduate Student Unionizing in an Anti-Union State



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Abstract

“Organizing in East Texas” is a firsthand account of the practices and action steps taken to soften the climate of a region hostile to union activity. We tell the story of how that shift in attitudes took place among a group of graduate students. From a grassroots letter-writing campaign that anonymized but personalized the economic reality of our shared situation, to surreptitious propaganda disbursement of student-made ‘zines around campus locations to raise general awareness, concrete steps that translate regardless of population are recommended and discussed. Told from the perspective of a blue-state native’s attempts to unionize amidst a climate antagonistic to the practice and a red-state native’s jump headlong into labor organization and activism, “Organizing in East Texas” discusses practices and immediately actionable steps anyone can take to form solidarity and affect change in the work climate for graduate students or other precarious labor.

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Rachel McShane (she/her) is currently a faculty member at Paris Junior College. Her research focuses on the intersection of feminist rhetorics, crime rhetorics, and place-based rhetoric; she specifically focuses on critically examining cases of women put on trial for murder in the State of Texas. She is also interested in academic labor, pedagogical studies, Children’s and Young Adult culture, and Indigenous literature. Her work has appeared in *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, East Texas A&M University’s award-winning *Writing Inquiry* textbook, and an edited collection titled *Voices from the Wreckage: Young Adult Voices in the #MeToo Movement*.

Graduate student workers are often dismissed in their institutions. Underpaid, overworked, exhausted and frustrated, they often feel unheard and taken advantage of. They exist in a weird limbo—not quite students, not quite faculty or staff—and can often feel powerless when it comes to speaking up or advocating for themselves. But there is a solution: unions. Although they are often frowned upon and discouraged by administrations, union membership and collective advocacy can promote real change and improve conditions for graduate student workers. Grassroots, direct action remains one of the best and most effective ways to improve working conditions on the ground.

In this article, we share our experiences with unions, both as individuals and as a collective. The first story, Brian’s experience, shares the perspective of someone who grew up in a pro-union environment, and seeing the dire need for a collective effort among graduate students in a rural East Texas university. The second, Rachel’s, is that of the opposite: growing up in a hard-core anti-union state, but witnessing the power and strength that labor unions can bring to graduate students. Then, together, we share a “how-to,” with tips and instructions on how others can recreate the unionizing we did at their own institutions.

Brian’s Experience

I was always a Civil Service exam away from being a third-generation letter carrier. My father and his father both retired from the United States Postal Service with pensions and medical insurance for themselves and their wives. In fact, when the Post Office workers struck in 1970, my grandfather was part of what Eric Loomis calls “the nation’s largest ever wildcat strike” (183).

“Starting in New York City in the early morning hours of March 18, 1970, and for the next 8 days, over 200,000 postal workers in 12 states struck 671 post offices in dozens of cities and towns across the country” (Rubio 65). This move was made despite the fact that, as federal workers, it was illegal to collectively bargain, and the strike itself was done despite the fact that postal “union national leaders opposed the strike” (Rubio 66). Here they were, 200,000 strong, in defiance of the law and union leadership, walking off the job and protesting.

In an effort to show strength and crush the strike, as well as discourage members of the post office who wouldn’t cross the picket lines, then-President Nixon attempted to show the striking post office workers they weren’t needed. Nixon “dispatched 23,000 United States Armed Forces personnel to New York City to process the mail, but without proper training, there was no way they could do the job” (“The Great Postal Strike of 1970”). This failed attempt prompted the government to begin negotiating with the post office unions, the very thing the law was meant to prohibit. In the aftermath of the strike, not only did a pay raise go through, but no “single striker was fired, and postal unions won full collective bargaining rights” (Rubio 66). If one thing was made clear in this instance: the power is always with the numbers, and the workers always have the numbers.

This triumph is part of my understanding: even when they tell you there’s something you can’t do (like strike or join a union), my family history runs counter to those ideas. So the idea that unionizing is illegal or strikes are off the table was never my reality—even when told “you can’t,” we did. This defiance is part of my DNA, and this attitude would be important later as I moved to the South.

I took for granted the fact that growing up, unions were normal. My cousin's husband is a union carpenter. My best friend in high school's father was a union welder. My teachers were in unions in public school. It was just kind of part of the public sector and the trades, at least for anyone who was making a living in those fields. I didn't realize that unions were deeply engrained in my own state's culture. In fact, in New Jersey, the state's constitution, Article 1, Section 19 currently reads: "Persons in private employment shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively. Persons in public employment shall have the right to organize, present to and make known to the State, or any of its political subdivisions or agencies, their grievances and proposals through representatives of their own choosing." While this can be nebulous regarding the state's view of a public sector worker's ability to collectively bargain, clarification is offered by the Public Employment Relations Commission (PERC) Law, which states:

The Public Employment Relations Act authorizes collective negotiations in New Jersey's public sector. The law establishes and protects the process of negotiations as the State's established public policy to determine terms and conditions of employment for public employees, including eligible school employees. Although the law requires that public employers, upon their organized employees' request, participate in bargaining and the law establishes what issues must be bargained, the law does not impose resolution of negotiable issues upon the parties contract. (1)

In other words, State employees are *also* guaranteed the right to collectively bargain. The fact that this is *in the law* demonstrated that the right for everyone to bargain collectively is important enough to the citizens of New Jersey and the state itself that it is written into and protected by the State's constitution.

Unions were a fact for me, but not *everyone* I knew was in one. And early on, I saw the difference in those holding union memberships compared to those who did not. I grew up watching my father take two weeks of paid vacation a year. He stayed home sick when he got sick. When I was in an accident as a teenager, he took time off work and never had to worry he'd get fired or be replaced by his job. My mother, on the other hand, worked as a nurse in private practice, and never had these luxuries. She never carried the insurance, she never got paid time off, and she worked every bit as hard. Early on, unions looked like the better deal.

In my youth, working mostly in restaurants, I never had a union. Long hours, dangerous moments, but enough pay to keep the worry away. Plus, I had the invulnerability of youth on my side. When I worked for a year in Heating and Air Conditioning, the company that hired me (albeit with no experience) was not a union shop. You could tell by the low pay and bad hours, with no benefits to speak of. Even then, as I compared the work I was doing with the union equivalents, I realized there was never any reason NOT to unionize. When I went back to school to ultimately end up teaching, I took that eventuality with me: I'd be a union teacher.

Then I got to Texas for graduate school. And the difference was more than night and day, more than a slight cultural shift. When it came to workers and unions, I felt like I was in a foreign country or alternate universe. We—the graduate student workers—were underpaid, underfunded, and under supported. And many of us didn't realize just how bad it really was until we were in the thick of it.

I can remember the look on the face of a colleague of mine when he found out he owed money to the college. When he explained he'd gotten a bill for over a thousand dollars I was

sure he was joking. “No,” I said. “We teach two classes, and we get two for free. That’s the deal.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” he replied, with that look I can still see. Confusion. Regret. The look of someone who played by all the rules and still got screwed.

It didn’t take long to find out the problem. We worked as student workers in a school that didn’t fully fund. While it was true we received free tuition for two classes, we didn’t get anything towards the fees and, at the time of attendance, fees outpriced tuition. I would go on to find out (again, the hard way, through experience) that if we opted to take an additional class, we then had to pay the tuition for that class *as well as* an even higher fee amount that skyrocketed into a whole new level of expense. In other words, we were quite literally paying to work at our institution.

Ideally as part of the acceptance procedure, one would find out whether a program is fully-funded, partially-funded, or not funded. However, I didn’t have a deep bench of college attendees to ask about this, and made a fundamental mistake: I assumed, much like my friend, that “teach two classes get two classes free” meant we hadn’t negotiated away what free meant. And much to my shock, I was wrong.

From that moment on, during every orientation, I made it a personal point to explain to every new Graduate Assistant Teacher (GAT) the money they would still owe. I also corrected a mistake in our collective understanding about financial aid. I was told in no uncertain terms that GATs were ineligible for financial aid, to the point where I hurriedly canceled mine. Thankfully, when I found out about the money I owed I did some research, learned the error in that message, and was able to re-file and receive financial aid. But, in the ultimate stroke of “Pay to Work Here,” I graduated with a PhD and almost a quarter of a million dollars in student loan debt. To teach. It’s my fault that my second job all through grad school was adjunct professor at the school I received my master’s degree from. Poverty wages don’t offset poverty wages.

I knew we needed help, an advocate; and, pulling from my experience and upbringing, I knew unions were the answer. But there wasn’t one anywhere to be found on campus. It’s hard to explain how alien it was to find a mid-sized university without something like a student or grad student union. The kind of organization I assumed would be in place as a matter of course was absent. Moreover, the rank-and-file student with whom I would later broach the topic was either misinformed about the legality of a union or downright hostile to the notion as somehow anti-worker. It’s the clearest success of any anti-union movement I’d ever seen.

Rachel’s Experience

I had quite literally never heard of a real-life, active union. I thought they were all dead.

I was raised in Rockwall, Texas, a county bordering the east side of Dallas. The town is small (literally—the entire town is only around 33 square miles, and the county is the smallest in Texas). For many years, it was rural, with only pockets of stores and businesses and houses scattered among acres of empty land and pastures. My grandparents moved there in the early 70s and still live in the original home they bought. Around that time, my grandmother founded a real-estate company, Regal Realtors, which grew to be quite successful in our little town; as children, whenever we saw her unique purple signs, we would proudly proclaim, “My Nana

owns Regal!” I learned to drive on asphalt backroads and in cow pastures, grew up fishing and chasing fireflies. The community was close-knit, with families that my Nana referred to as “old Rockwall folks,” many of which were her own family. I used to joke that I was related to half of the town.

Rockwall has changed quite a bit over the years. Those 33 square miles are now densely packed with over 53,000 people (according to the 2024 census). There are not just pockets of stores and businesses anymore—there are huge stores, restaurants, and strip centers on almost every corner. The cow pastures and asphalt roads I learned to drive on are now multi-laned paved roads and massive housing developments. But despite all that, Rockwall has always had a small-town feel. My grandmother has since retired and sold her company, but still to this day when I see a purple Regal Realtors sign, I think, “That’s Nana’s.” Even though there are lots of new people, there are plenty of old Rockwall folks, too. “Oh I worked with your grandmother,” “I went to high school with your mother,” or “I know your cousin so-and-so,” are phrases I’m accustomed to.

I think this small-town feel is why, despite its growth and progress, Rockwall, Texas is still deeply conservative. According to the city’s own statistics, in the last three presidential elections, almost 70% of citizens voted overwhelmingly for Republican candidates on all national, state, and local levels of government (“2016 Results”; “2020 Results”; “2024 Results”). Lately, around election seasons, the Rockwall Republican Party hosts what they call “Trump Trains,” massive lines of cars driving through the town. On their event page, they state “all vehicles are welcome and MUST be decorated showing support for President Trump (homemade signs are welcome)” (Rockwall GOP, emphasis original). For several months after the 2020 election, people lined up on Horizon Road, which overpasses I-30, holding up signs that read “Trump Won” and protesting the results of the election. And when he won the 2024 election, countless celebrations and parties were held all over town.

This was the culture that was ingrained in me. This was the life I lived. I think I can count on one hand the amount of Democrats I knew growing up. I say all of this to drive home the point I opened with: unions were essentially non-existent where I was raised. Sure, I learned about them in history classes when we talked about the early beginnings of American labor. But as far as I knew, labor unions were a thing of the past, a thing only present in history books. In fact, when Brian approached me and suggested we look at joining a union, I think I literally said, “Wait, those are real?”

My experience is not unique simply because I grew up in the smallest county of Texas. While some people might not have been quite as unaware as me (in that they thought unions didn’t exist), many Texans believe that there are none in the state, or that to join one is illegal. Rob D’Amico, the Texas American Federation of Teachers Communication Director, wrote, “Invariably, someone responds to one of my Facebook posts — where I often use the word ‘union’ to describe Texas AFT — with a vehement objection. ‘There are no unions in Texas!’ or ‘Unions are illegal in Texas!’” Texas has long been known as an anti-union state. In fact, several authors all used the same word to describe the State’s attitude towards unions: hostile (Salinas; Amberg; Maroney and Glasburd). So, although there are unions present in the state, they certainly are not embraced with excitement by either the government or the people.

Perhaps this is because of Texas' Western-cowboy culture that has a "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" attitude. Or perhaps it's the deep-seated "we don't need you" mentality rooted in Texas history. After breaking away from Mexico in 1836, Texas was its own nation for almost ten years before joining the United States ("No, Texas Can't Legally Secede"). Despite being a part of the country (and receiving Federal support), every few years, there is talk of Texas seceding and reestablishing itself as its own country. In 2009, then-governor Rick Perry said, "When we came into the nation in 1845, we were a republic; we were a stand-alone nation. And one of the deals was we could leave whenever we want, so we're kind of thinking of that again" (qtd Holley). In 2022, Texas Senator Ted Cruz hinted at secession saying, "We're not there yet," but quickly following up with the implication that it is a strong possibility: "I think we take NASA, we take the military, we take the oil," he confidently claimed (qtd Holley). Texas seems to have a culture of not just independence, but almost one of isolation.

Often, Texans express feeling threatened by outsiders. In his book *The Seven Keys to Texas*, historian T.R. Fehrenbach suggests that Texas culture pushes against change and hasn't "altered all that much in 150 years" (117). He goes on to explain, "Times change, fads and foibles change...But most of these changes in Texas have occurred less from evolution or choice than pressure. Virtually all the political and social reforms of the twentieth century enacted by government have been forced down the Anglo-Texan throat" (117). *New York Times* journalist and proud Texan Manny Fernandez echoes this, writing, "People throughout the state [of Texas] say they believe that their way of life is under assault and that they are making a kind of last stand by simply being Texan. It is this fear, anger, and sometimes paranoia that lurks beneath the surface of Texas politics."

With this in mind, of course Texans feel hesitant to embrace labor unions: they are seen as a group of outsiders coming in, telling people how to run their business. Maroney and Glasund explain that "Texas's great size and its many small, isolated communities" breeds "a suspicious and hostile environment towards labor unions" (4). Amberg calls it "the contemporary post-facto image of Texas as one member of a category of conservative or nonunion states versus liberal or union-friendly states" (147). In other words, it's us versus them, the unions versus the good Texas folk, the outsiders versus the insiders.

Fehrenbach also explains extensively the way the evolution of Texas economy has led to a strong anti-union attitude. When white settlers arrived, they "created the first true Texan economy" via agriculture and farming. Texas became known as "the Cotton Kingdom," and, like many colonial plantations and farms, slaves made up not only a large part of the economy, but most of the labor on cotton farms (Fehrenbach 47-52). After the Union's victory in the Civil War, one would think the cotton industry suffered, but "The Cotton Kingdom" stood strong and actually grew with the use of sharecropping and led to Texas cotton being exported to Europe.

Another major factor in Texas economy arose in the 1800s: ranching. Texas became the national leader in production and sales of cows, beef, leather, and all things bovine, earning itself another royal title: "The Cattle Kingdom" (Fehrenbach 52). "Cowboy culture, with its own loyalties, loneliness, manhood rites and version of the code duello" became iconically linked to Texas culture (Fehrenbach 52). "Cattle barons" (a term for ranchers who came to Texas and established large, successful ranches) began to pop up all over the state. Initially,

ranching and cowboy culture was viewed as a lifestyle an individual could adopt. But as ranches grew (both in number and in size), running a ranch began to look less like a lifestyle and more like a business. Instead of the labor structure made up of slave-owners and slaves or land-owners and sharecroppers (as it was on cotton farms), ranches were structured by a three-tiered hierarchy: the rancher (or owner), the foreman (or overseer), and the hired-hands (the laborers themselves) (Fehrenbach 65). In other words, ranches looked much more like a corporate business, with multiple levels of management. And as ranching took off, so too did the number of laborers they needed. “By the 1880s ranching has become such a business as opposed to a way of life that cowhands, now too numerous and feeling oppressed [...] sometimes tried to strike—but those little known and scattered labor actions were doomed” (Fehrenbach 53).

The oil boom in Texas produced a similar style of business: more layers of management, more and more laborers needed. And as Texas economy grew, so too did the need for buildings and infrastructure, leading to construction being a major business in the state. But as the economy shifted and changed, there was still a common narrative about Texas: here, anyone could build a “personal empire.” Even as things have modernized and businesses have changed, the layout of business infrastructure remains largely the same: “owners and employees, with lines sharply drawn and few layers of management in-between” (62).

Take all of these factors: intense individualism; a “we-don’t-need-you” attitude; a bootstrap mentality; the mythos of the self-built empire; the lines divided between business owners and laborers. Mix them all together, and what do you get? Answer: an environment that is naturally suspicious and hostile towards collective labor efforts like unions. Texas laborers are expected to channel their ancestors’ determination, push aside any intruders, and reject all forms of help in order to establish their own *individual* success. Fehrenach writes, “It follows that, although great wealth *can* be created in such an infrastructure, it is not necessarily widely diffused, and labor unions are relatively few and weak. Labor is mostly unorganized, and labor organizations lack economic and political power” (64).

So, when Brian suggested that union membership might be the way to go for graduate students, I didn’t know such a thing was possible. In his story, Brian mentioned that union membership is so valued and cherished, it’s written into New Jersey’s constitution. But in Texas, it’s a different story. Title 6 of our state code reads “An official of the state or of a political subdivision of the state may not enter into a collective bargaining contract with a labor organization regarding wages, hours, or conditions of employment of public employees” (“Government Code Title 6”). In other words, while in New Jersey protects and values collective bargaining and labor organizations (to the point it protects them in the state constitution), in Texas they are actively and officially *discouraged*. While unions are technically legal, by removing collective bargaining, they’ve lost their teeth: what good is a union if you’re not allowed to collectively bargain? This also likely contributes to the misbelief that unions are “illegal” in our State.

When I heard Brian share his experience with unions, I had my doubts and unsureness, but was willing to try; I didn’t know what unions even were, but I wanted to believe in them. Although the idea was totally foreign to me, I knew something needed to change, which meant we needed to try something different. Of course, when we began to propose the idea to our

colleagues, we were met with that inherent Texas mindset. Many were quick to say, “Oh we can’t do that—unions are illegal in Texas.” Others were vehemently against it, arguing that unions were inevitably bad or corrupt. And still others encouraged us to just be patient, to work within the system, and to just wait for the upper admin and those in charge to notice us. But that felt like waiting under the table for a few breadcrumbs to be dropped—sure, it might happen, but it wouldn’t be any time soon, wouldn’t be nearly enough to sustain us, and certainly wouldn’t be because we felt seen or heard. Although union membership was unknown to me, it seemed to be the only way to make our voices heard.

We researched and gathered information and ultimately decided that the Texas State Employees Union was the right one for us. As we spread the word to our coworkers and fellow graduate student employees, we were still met with claims like “I can’t do that.” One friend even shared, “My advisor told me not to, because it could harm the likelihood of me getting a job.” Our union presence was ultimately very small—Brian, me, and a handful of other colleagues. But it was there, nonetheless.

Over time, the union came to our support time and time again. What was perhaps the most eye-opening occurrence for me was when the union came to support our fight against raising student fees and tuition. The university began to enter discussion of raising student fees and tuition, something that we found unbelievable when we considered the thousands of dollars we still had to pay in fees (despite being graduate student workers making very little money). Brian suggested we go to the union for help. I was doubtful—why would a labor union care about a university’s tuition and fees costs? Although it *did* impact us as graduate student workers, it didn’t seem a full-fledged labor issue to me. I fully expected our TSEU rep to kindly say, “Sorry, but we can’t really help.”

But, to my surprise, the union came in full force. They drove over an hour to our rural university, with tables and signs and thousands of fliers and people to hand them out. They started an online petition that gained thousands of signatures. They created an email campaign that made it easy for supporters to email upper-admin and even the board of regents, expressing dissent over the rising costs. There were QR codes on the fliers and social media links for people to share. The amount of backing we had from TSEU was a shock to me.

And, even more to my surprise, it worked. Not long after, the university announced the costs would remain the same.

Seeing how our union not only *cared* about us, but also came to our aid and advocated for us on a large scale in our time of need, was a huge cannon shot in the anti-union fortress where I had lived my entire life. That was when it became very real to me: collective efforts and unionizing is a strong, powerful way to advocate for ourselves. And we needed this.

I’m now a firm believer that *all* graduate student workers— some of the most often overlooked, mistreated, and underrepresented in their institutions—need union support. Really, I think *all* workers should consider a union. I guess you could say I joined the cause. It can work, but it has to start like it did for us: a group of people who feel fed up and frustrated and want to try something different. Unionizing is the answer. Together we are strong. You’ll get pushback, you’ll get discouragement, but if you stay the course, it will work.

Trust me. I’ve seen it first-hand.

How To

In the interest of helping any graduate student workers or other vulnerable populations, the concrete steps we took to affect our immediate situation, as well as leave a legacy of better representation and pay behind are outlined below. Feel free to adopt any as you are able, and remember: we made much of this up on the fly. Utilizing the structures you may already have on campus or in your workplace will only make this easier.

1) Talk to Each Other

This is the first rule of organizing. Talk CONSTANTLY. And talk about everything.

The first attitude one must overcome in order to successfully organize graduate student labor in a climate hostile to the idea is to open dialogue about the taboo subject of money. We were able to do this from the collective shock of realizing we didn't get free classes when we taught for pennies. Then, the knowledge of that began to spread at future orientations, all to mitigate the shock of the fees for new GATs, as well as to inform them of their right to borrow to offset the poor wages.

There is a real cultural taboo when it comes to talking about money and paychecks. But fight the urge to keep it a secret. There were times we took out paystubs and literally compared them side by side. "They're paying you *how much*? Well they're paying me a couple of hundred less!" We talked to our colleagues about how much we paid in fees, how much insurance was costing us, even how much we received for travel funding when attending conferences (which, by the way, was never *actually* enough to cover the trip, but that's another story entirely).

Talking is important for a few reasons. The first is it helps you to know what to work towards. If you all speak up, you all know what you're collectively dealing with, and can begin to strategize about how to collectively solve the problem. It also can keep everyone informed and in the loop, so they know what to expect. For example, when we both first started our positions as graduate students, no one told us that, despite starting work in August, we wouldn't see a paycheck until "the new fiscal year," which was October 1. That meant we worked for over a month with literally no income to show. It was a struggle, and we were both caught off guard; but every semester after that, we made sure to tell all incoming GAs "Hey, heads up: you're not gonna get paid until October 1. Have a plan."

Lastly (and maybe most importantly), talking takes everyone out of isolation and brings us together, which is a way to take back power. Karl Marx and Freidrich Engels write in *The Communist Manifesto*:

[T]he labourers still form an incoherent mass scattered over the whole country, and broken up by their mutual competition. [...] This union is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another. It was just this contact that was needed to centralise the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle between classes.

In other words, isolation and separation is a tool that those in power use to keep the workers (or, in our case, graduate students) overworked, underpaid, and in their place. We see this in the silo mentality of colleges: History over there, Math over here, and never the two shall cross

paths. Even within departments, there are little mini-silos keeping us apart: tenured or full-time professors congregate here; graduate employees over there; while adjuncts are often kept isolated just outside the doors. Keep them apart, and they can't talk to each other. Furthermore, the relative scarcity of tenure and tenure-track teaching jobs can have the effect of making adjunct and other on-demand workers look like a threat. This is all by design of course, because once people break that barrier and shatter the taboo around sharing pay information, it makes discrepancies visible and combating them possible. But talking—sharing concerns, struggles, and issues together—brings people together and motivates change. One by one, we begin to recognize, “Wait, you're getting screwed over...me too! Let's work together and fight back!”

2) *Find and Recruit Allies*

Without the existing infrastructure, it was difficult to build a student union from the ground up, especially in my (Brian's) first two years in Texas. The discussions around fees as well as our terrible paychecks culminated in sympathy from some tenured faculty. This is where we'd find the cover for some of our stealthier operations later; in the early stages, though, our faculty allies began when we joined SEGAD (Spanish and English Graduate Advancement and Development), an English club that had been dormant for some time. The faculty advisor for this club was among our first and definitely our fiercest advocates in the department, and she was integral in getting our first meeting off the ground.

Under the guise of a “meet-and-greet” with the new Graduate School Dean (then acting), we held an airing of grievances. From the look on her face, it's clear she had not expected this. We each explained our situations—how little we made, how much the school still took, and the plight of the international students, who depended on the university only for their whole source of income and *still* had to pay the fees. They were unable to work off-campus and juggle another job like most of us had to. After the dean slunk away from our “meet-and-greet-turned-bombardment,” the stirrings of a plan developed: we would write a campaign of letters, detailing our plight. Anonymize them, then have them delivered to the graduate school. But for this, we needed coverage—namely, someone with tenure.

We were uniquely aware of the precarity of our jobs, as well as our lack of power, being student workers. It didn't matter that we were instructors of record for the classes we taught, we were still looked at as assistants—easily replaceable. Those in our cohort who were international students on visas were uniquely and especially aware that they might lose everything if the school should retaliate. We needed to shield the more vulnerable among us, and we needed someone to deliver the letters who the graduate school would be receptive to. It didn't take long to find allies—this meeting was evidently an eye-opening to our instructors in attendance as it was to our new graduate school dean. They heard our stories and joined our cause. Remember that part about talking? Talk to your professors, too. They might not know how little the school thinks you're worth, and it might be in their wheelhouse to remind them.

The next phase here was what Brian liked to call “herding cats.” While many among us had no qualms about vocalizing concerns to the graduate school acting dean, there was something about committing these grievances to paper that caused many to falter. We found ourselves walking the halls on days off, rallying the troops, using the carrot when possible. We decided early on to leave the international students out for this phase, as we couldn't assuage

their fears, even writing anonymously, so we had to rely on a subset of us to get the message across. That made getting every letter we could very important.

Over the course of the next two months, we got around twenty letters— heartbreakers, really. The reality of this seemingly prestigious student-worker opportunity was laid bare as the sham it was. Hearing it in different voices, to different degrees, brought that home. We had the letters delivered by a tenured professor, who scrubbed names and any references too specific to leave in there, again for fear of reprisal.

3) *DIY is Your Best Friend*

In the time the letters were being cajoled and drafted, we were invited into a graduate class to speak about the progress. The instructor was one of our earliest allies and had us come and bring information as we gathered it— everything from the Financial Aid lie being debunked to residency rules we were learning on the fly (during a separate but no less tenacious battle).

This instructor used her privilege to have her class members who were in the same boat as us (underpaid, overworked, and underrepresented) to make ‘zines— cartoonish examples of the life of a graduate student, as a graduate student worker. The official story is that these “ended up” all over campus. But we knew: every one we laid out was intentional. Key points of distribution were chosen for foot traffic— the library, the student center, etc. And *maybe*, one evening, after a grad class, someone didn’t lock the door to the lobby outside the president’s office. *Maybe* some of the ‘zines ended up on a coffee table where those waiting to meet the president might have seen them. We don’t know, there were stories to that effect...who knows? We didn’t think much of it after that.

In less than three months, that very same semester at our department’s holiday party held just before the Fall semester ended we got word: we were getting a raise. Of fifty percent. Immediately. All doctoral students in English who taught would see their pay increase.

In just a few short months, we’d managed to get enough voices behind our request to where the graduate school couldn’t ignore us, and the money we needed was suddenly *found*. The administration said something along the lines of “We’ll need to secure long-term funding for the raises,” however, that’s an administration problem, not a worker problem. Once you get something like that in the books they can’t take it away.

Of course, they were quick to couch this behind “Don’t ask for anything else,” but that must be part of it. They wanted us to be quiet, so they tried to buy us off. But in those initial moments, it didn’t matter: we had won.

And, of course: it wouldn’t be the last time they heard from us. We got wind of a tuition and fee increase shortly thereafter, and we all know how that worked out in our favor as well.

4) *Organize Anyway*

They’ll tell you that you can’t. They’ll say it’s illegal. It’s not. If you can’t get sufficient groundswell to organize yourselves, or even to fold into an existing, bigger union, know that as an individual you are free to join a union.

After some research, a few of us ended up in the Texas State Employees’ Union. Know, however, that this is not the only approach. We did kick around the idea of forming our own union. There exist great resources and willing advocates who can and will travel to you and

show you how to get a union off the ground. United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America, for example, provide a handy how-to no matter your stage in organizing: [The Five Basic Steps to Organizing a Union | UE](#) Other colleges have rolled into existing unions, and we chose to individually join the union we felt like had the most applicability to us. In hindsight, it ended up being a great idea, as our first organizer was a fantastic one.

We had a union table set up at the following orientation, hoping to grab new members as they entered the school, before any settling-in of the anti-union attitude, and we called on our organizer every time we wanted to get something on campus. Heck, she called us sometimes because she just felt like coming out to organize.

Remember: you can always get permission to set up a protest and all that. This is still, at the time of writing at least, America. And you can explain to any campus or local police that come to your table that the first amendment is part and parcel of your efforts on campus. This we learned from our organizer, and this we carry to this day.

5) *Show Up. Even Alone.*

Sometimes all it takes is just one voice. One person saying, “Hey, this isn’t right. Let’s talk about it.”

When the university was talking about raising tuition and fees, we worried we might be alone, but the union showed up in force to hand out fliers. Our union organizer also taught us how to respond to interference. She showed us where we could and couldn’t stand, things we could and couldn’t do, and how to stand up for ourselves if threatened in any way. Whenever a university police officer approached us, whether at a table or wandering around campus handing out these flyers, we learned to greet officers with “I’m exercising my first amendment rights.” We got used to saying this first, even before a “hello,” to provide appropriate context for our actions. Being approached by university officers or other school employees and receiving push-back wasn’t a big surprise; but it was when we were met with student resistance. “You’re not allowed to leave these around,” we would hear from undergraduates and graduate students alike. “Stop it,” is how we interpreted that. But we didn’t let it deter us: our response was similar to the ‘zines, as well as the mini-rally, we just did it anyway.

As we passed out fliers out to students, we told everyone of an open hearing the school would be holding where anyone—students, faculty, administration, staff—could come and voice their concerns. *Tons* of students said, “Oh yeah, we’ll be there.” Faculty members promised the same. We started to get excited. We expected to show up to that meeting with a crowd full of outraged students and faculty behind us. We thought it would be incredible.

And then, the day of, it was just the two of us.

Well, not entirely. There were other people in the room. The president of the university, the then-provost, some folks from the budget offices. A member of our campus radio station also came and covered a story on it (invited by us, of course: the more attention, the better). But as for students, it was just us: two lone graduate student workers.

Initially, there was anger. *Where are all the students?* we thought. *The ones who said they’d come? Who seemed outraged and angry when we put the flier in their hands? What about all the faculty who said they’d support us? Where are they?*

They bailed.

But despite that, we both stood when the mic became open, and aired our grievances and concerns. It seemed initially that we were met with dismissal and disinterest. When we mentioned how the raise in costs would impact graduate student workers like ourselves, and share our own experiences—the ways we struggle, how we could hardly afford basic living needs, the amount we still had to pay in fees despite all the hard work we put in—we were met with indifference. One particular member of administration looked us dead in the eye, shrugged, and said, “We’ve never had a problem with GA retention, so I don’t think it will be a problem.”

We walked away feeling defeated. Like no one actually cared. Not the students, not the faculty, and certainly not the administration. The fight felt over and done.

And then a few weeks later, the university announced they would not be raising tuition and fees after all. Of course, they credited it to their care and concern and careful discretion. But when I talked about it with a friend (who, coincidentally, worked as an administrative assistant in one of the upper-level offices), she leaned in and quietly informed me that behind closed doors, the real reason was they didn’t want more trouble from those pesky union grad students.

6) *Know Your Worth*

Getting a PhD in the climate we face in America is an unsure position. There’s no way to know if you’ll land a job teaching, if that’s what you want, or if you’ll end up in some post-Doc purgatory. “In 1995, 75 percent of all teaching positions on college campuses were full-time and tenure track . . . Twenty years later, by 2015, the reverse was true: 75 percent of all teaching positions are now temporary or adjunct positions” (McAlevy 90). Adjuncts and Graduate Student Workers have more in common than they have differences. A way to spread your message to other vulnerable populations is right there in front of you.

It’s also important to know the numbers. Anecdotally from administration we heard that as much as 85 percent of Freshman Comp classes were taught by graduate students. Imagine the power we had, should we have been able to capitalize on it. Getting the groundwork laid sooner might have afforded us the ability to use those numbers to our advantage, however, there’s no reason others can’t start here. If your school is a state school, they’re usually quite good at publishing budgets, and most departments will know the ratio of full-time professors to grad students. Using this data in your posters, using this as leverage, even using this as a way to convince others to be sympathetic to your cause is invaluable. The numbers, as they say, don’t lie.

7) *Remember: This isn’t just about you. It’s about everyone.*

Marx and Engels write, “Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers.” In other words, it won’t always be win after win. Sometimes you’ll lose. Sometimes you’ll think, *This is never going to change, and I’m never going to see the end of this thing.* And, you might not. Things might not change at that moment. But you’re laying down the groundwork, and leaving a legacy.

It would have been easy to pull for ourselves. We could have petitioned the administration to grant raises on an individual basis, or on length of service, or introduce some other structure

that might have benefited a few of us upfront with the idea that it gets better later. All those notions were rejected because, as a rising tide lifts all boats, sometimes you've gotta be the tide.

In the first few years of our unionizing efforts, we introduced a school with no infrastructure for representation to the beauty of on-campus organizing. We enrolled a number of members for the Texas State Employees Union. We got word that first the raise was made permanent. Then, from continued efforts from those in power behind us, the fees are on their way out. The school is moving to a fully-funded model for Graduate Student workers.

The lasting legacy of continued advocacy is the greatest one we could have hoped for. Graduate students seem easy to ignore, as administration in these situations know that a student-worker, no matter how tenacious, is only a temporary problem. They'll graduate, leave, and move on to cause trouble somewhere else. But an on-campus union presence, with members of administration towing the line, with tenured professors as advocates, means the change can continue beyond the few years any of us are physically on the ground. So our last piece of advice is to keep your eye on systemic change. Sure, win in the moment, like we did with raises and stopping the raise in costs. But also, always be looking forward. Don't forget this is bigger than you. Try to leave everything better than you found it.

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Union Vibes



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Abstract

“Union Vibes” considers my experience alongside national conversations about higher-ed labor organizing and the conundrums presented by the ossified Texas State Employees Union, which attempts to represent all public workers in Texas, but does almost nothing for almost nobody. I include reporting from the 2024 Labor Notes national conference in Chicago, interviews with union leaders and labor researchers, and conversations with my colleagues and local activists. Ultimately, I ask: Are the arduous steps necessary for robust organizing ultimately worth it in a place like Texas? If so, what might those steps be, and what would make such organizing meaningful when the prospect of collective bargaining remains mostly a pipedream?

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I.

In broad strokes the stories are similar; only the details differ: Coworkers start talking about forming a union. They recruit their colleagues. When they achieve critical mass, they confront the boss with their demands. Unless the boss acquiesces, a union vote is scheduled. If the vote is successful, negotiations begin. When a contract agreement cannot be reached, the newly unionized workers may strike to procure better pay and working conditions.

This is the formula. It’s easier said than done, but that’s how you do it. I didn’t need to attend the 2024 National Labor Notes Conference on union organizing to learn this. The week before, I heard it all in a classroom in the building where I taught at the University of North Texas (UNT), in Denton, 40 miles north of Dallas. I’d seen a flier that read “Labor April” at the top with the logos of several local activist groups at the bottom. There was a meeting that

very night. When I arrived, the classroom was half full of students. In it, I heard from a Young Democratic Socialist leader, two recently unionized Starbucks employees, and a UPS guy who had helped his colleagues join the Teamsters labor union. The meeting revolved around expanding Starbucks and UPS workers' success in unionizing to other local workplaces. The UPS guy talked the most. He said: "You can organize around stuff you and your coworkers already enjoy doing together, like playing soccer." He said: "If the guy who sells everyone their weed gets on board, that can be a big win." Finally, he said: "You have to be willing to lose your job."

That's always the catch. In theory I am increasingly willing to lose my job, but so far not in practice. My job teaching essay writing to college students is continually stripped of efficacy, but I cling to it hard as ever. I was conscious that attending Labor Notes was an extension of my ambivalence. By traveling solo to a union-organizing conference, I feared I was accomplishing the solidaristic equivalent of buying rock-climbing gear but still not going rock-climbing.

When not teaching, I wandered campus hallways alone. In the tower where I worked, fluorescent lights buzzed on as you passed beneath them and clicked off as you left. This, combined with catacomb-like office suites, produced the lonely suspicion that 1) you were the only person working, and 2) all your atomized colleagues thought the same thing. Sometimes I would see another faculty member, several light stations ahead of me, disappearing around a dark corner and again confront the insurmountable awkwardness of ever talking with this fading person about how they procure their weed, much less about union organizing.

The distance between what Labor Notes could offer and the situation where I worked felt equivalent to the distance between Dallas and Chicago if traveling by foot. I wanted to feel that distance nevertheless. I hoped the journey would clarify the seemingly impossible actions that would allow my colleagues and me to improve our lot, or at least to make a map.

2.

Most workers in Texas have little access to union support, but public sector employees have arguably the least. Beyond Texas being a Right to Work state, Texas, along with seven other states, has also banned most state workers from collective bargaining. This means that even where unions do exist, they cannot compel the state to negotiate with them. Public employees are thereby reduced to what people at Labor Notes refer to as *collective begging*. In this situation, a union's efforts are often as valiant as their gains are minimal. Active members come to feel, in the words of a North Carolina high school teacher I met at the conference, like "professional donut passer-outers." They procure for their members improvements such as slightly longer planning periods, or somewhat more humane sick-leave policies.

At UNT, we didn't even have collective begging. We had campus leadership that issued edicts against faculty speaking out, a dean who wouldn't reply to emails regarding untenable working conditions, and department chairs who hoarded resources for cabals of old-guard faculty at the expense of everyone else. Before the pandemic, we had happy hours that devolved into gripe sessions. After the pandemic, we drank alone. Instead of solidarity, we had isolation, hostility, and pettiness.

In the weeks before the conference, I procrastinated on grading essays by reading labor journalist Hamilton Nolan's 2024 book *The Hammer*. Each chapter describes a recent battle to unionize, from longshoremen in South Carolina to food processing workers in Oregon. When I was halfway through the book, I sent Nolan an email full of praise and stuffed with questions about why he didn't include a chapter on union organizing in higher education. He responded that organizing in higher education was probably the area of work most often written about, and that he wanted to focus on overlooked efforts elsewhere, such as in the service industry. Fair enough, I thought, but what about those of us traipsing empty campus hallways in Texas?

In Texas, the only public employees allowed to collectively bargain are police and firefighters. The law forbidding the rest of the public sector came about in the same decade that Texas led the conservative backlash against the New Deal. This is Texas's true legacy, not as a bastion of freedom but as a laboratory of oppression. After all, Texas broke away from Mexico and became its own republic explicitly to preserve slavery. Then, as the union's 28th state, Texas continued to enslave African Americans well past Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation until June 19, 1865, two months after the Civil War's official end—the day now celebrated as Juneteenth—when union troops arrived in Galveston and announced that more than 250,000 people enslaved in the state were free by executive decree. While there is a hint of reparation underlying the new national holiday, it is Texas' history of oppression that has continued to metastasize in ways including newly installed razor wire in the Rio Grande, the stripping of protections such as state-mandated hydration breaks for outdoor laborers, and the criminalization of abortion.

These crimes reveal Texas' land-of-opportunity myth as a lie meant to obscure cruelty. Fully acknowledging this, however, is tricky for anyone like me who relocates to the state for a job. It's not a coincidence that, as academic jobs disappear nationwide, Texas could offer me a full-time position on the edge of one of the fastest growing metro areas in the country—a college town where I could afford to buy a house, where I could ride my bike to work, where I could walk my kid to school. My good luck in landing my job came with tacit acceptance of Texan myth.

The road does not go on forever. Eventually you have to go to work, which means that mostly I think about the state's contradictions while wandering the hallways outside my office. Texas' wide-open spaces contain a portal to the hallway. (This strange idea is taken up by, of all people, David Byrne, lead singer of The Talking Heads, who wrote and directed the 1986 movie *True Stories*, which takes North Texas as its subject and suggests uncanny portals between the ranch and the shopping mall.) I think of these campus hallways as the container of my own subjective Texas. This is the bait and switch of Texas, the original Texas two-step. It was at times delightfully melancholic to become middle-aged in Texas. It was at times unbearable.

3.

I offer this commentary not only to detail my own unlikely frontiersman ennui, but also by analogy to characterize UNT's existence as a Tier 1 research institution. The school, a supposed model for higher ed success for this century, lacks the infrastructure, funding, culture, and history of Tier 1 research institutions elsewhere, but it has made up for this by excelling at

crunching numbers: x amount of research grants, y amount of advanced degree programs. So that, on paper, UNT is not just Tier 1, but is outpacing its peers. I think of the scene in the movie *Giant* where the newly minted oil tycoon played by James Dean flies over Rock Hudson's car-driving family in a private plane, and it is easy to picture the belly of that plane emblazoned with the Texas university system's Lonestar seal. Texas's huge population of college-aged people has allowed higher ed to boom like oil. And, because oil is the standard for everything in Texas, education is treated, as much as possible, as a commodity like oil.

I witnessed one memorable manifestation of this approach when, at the end of my first year, the then-provost hosted me along with several other faculty who had signed up for a brown bag luncheon and chat session. This informal gathering was, to my knowledge, our only opportunity to interact with the provost. We supplied our own lunch and drink. The provost provided dessert. We met in her opulent office in the central campus building, which features a steeple with a green lantern that is lit whenever the football team wins. Dessert consisted of muffins from the campus food court, which the provost cut into quarters with a plastic knife so that there would be enough muffin for each of us.

After we swallowed our muffin wedges, the provost gave a presentation: "Research 1, Our Way." Full-color print outs depicting the various metrics that measure Tier 1 research institutions were distributed around the luncheon table. Beneath each was a graph that showed where UNT was currently, where it had been, and where it was going. Each "where are we going" graph featured a large green dot, rendered precisely in the school's garish shade of green (Pantone PMS 356 C). These dots were familiar on campus. They mirrored ubiquitous sidewalk stickers in front of residential buildings asking students, "So, what's your green dot?" as if the entirety of their experience might render them a point of data, which for the provost it already had. The reduction of the entirety of research, teaching, and learning into data points also inadvertently advertised the need for strong higher ed unions, impossible as they may be currently in Texas.

By the provost's own admission, which she regarded as a triumph, UNT's rise happened mostly through scrupulous number crunching she had implemented upon arrival. This meant that, ultimately, the provost's green dot was an accounting trick. Those of us around the conference table knew then: This provost was going places. And soon, she did leave, to become president of University of Texas at Arlington, another state-funded, DFW mega-university that had also recently become Tier 1.

Relating this anecdote helps me to connect Texas' general bait and switch to UNT's specific bait and switch, which is also by now our entire economy's bait and switch. The fact that UNT is sometimes seen as a model of success in contemporary higher ed, growing its student body by 10 percent year after year, even through the height of the pandemic, bolsters the suggestion that Texas is coming to a place near you, and that you, wherever you might be and in whatever field you might persist, are probably a little Texan already.

I imagine both of us, you and I, wandering our separate hallways. A faint green flash as a fluorescent bulb blinks off.

4.

The 2024 Labor Notes Conference took place in Rosemont, just outside Chicago, in the shadow of O'Hare International Airport. Over 5000 people attended. On my first day, I visited a panel discussion led by K-12 teachers from Massachusetts and Oregon who had undertaken illegal strikes and prevailed, a session on union-building in right-to-work states, and a roundtable discussion including labor journalists Hamilton Nolan and Kim Kelly. Most pertinent to my situation, on the second afternoon I attended a presentation by members of Communication Workers of America-Tennessee (CWA-TN) about “building campaigns that can’t lose” as a tactic for organizing non-majority unions in states where public employees are barred from collective bargaining. The first evening, I joined a Free Palestine protest in front of the convention center in which the Rosemont police detained, and later were forced to release, a teenaged attendee after the crowd surrounded the squad car while chanting “Union Power.” The next day I walked a picket line to support workers at Portillos, a Chicago-based Italian beef chain that made absurd profits through the pandemic and shared almost none of this money with employees—employees, who, two weeks later, would vote to join the Iron Workers.

This was all stuff my UNT colleagues and I avoided talking about, much less strategizing toward, as if even our whispers might get us fired. At Labor Notes I learned about the pervasiveness of this assumption, which, in turn, suggests how the boss’s logic infects our psyches. Again and again, I heard organizers discuss combating the apathy produced by such beliefs. I heard it so often that the salient feature of the conference became the repeated tale of prevailing in this combat. This reminded me of church conferences I attended as a child, and I began to think of Labor Notes as a kind of worker’s church, where, like at a church conference, repetition proved the accelerant of fervor.

At the last meeting I attended, an enormous session for higher ed workers, I heard educators from California, Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey discuss the wage increases, workload protections, and benefits they had won. When we broke into small groups to share our thoughts, I could only say I wanted all of what had been described but that at universities across Texas, we have none of it. My groupmates shook their heads. They felt my pain. They were glad it wasn’t precisely theirs.

5.

At this point, it may be surprising to learn that my desire to belong to a union fomented at the same time that UNT already had a union to which I did not belong. I am speaking of the Texas State Employees Union (TSEU), which, according to their website, “represents state workers from nearly every agency and state universities across Texas,” including employees in human services, health care, and juvenile justice, as well as across higher education (Who is TSEU?). At UNT, members of TSEU that I could actually find had only bad things to say about it. The three people I met all told me it was not worth it to join TSEU. “They are mostly an ineffectual lobbying group at this point,” said one. “They don’t really do anything, and they won’t ever call you back,” said another. “I tell myself it’s worth it for the monthly magazine I receive in the mail,” said the third.

I had worked at UNT for two years before I learned of TSEU's existence. By then, I had already landed on my department chair's shitlist. During my lunch with the provost, she asked us each to tell her what she could fix for us if [she] had a magic wand." In response, I explained that my office had been taken away, leaving me with no place to lesson plan, grade papers, or meet with students, even as old-guard faculty in my department retained two offices, one for administrative work and one for research. The provost said she was sorry to hear this, but that there was likely nothing she could do, so it came as a surprise weeks later when one old-guard faculty said I could share her unused second office. The week after that, my department chair called a meeting for all the non-tenure track faculty in which she chastised us for "not obeying the chain of command"—as if we were Marines. She didn't mention me by name; she didn't need to. From that point on, I was made to feel unwelcome and unwanted in overt and subtle ways: I was tasked with teaching more in-person students than anyone else in the fall of 2020, when almost everyone else's classes were moved online. And, I soon became, and remained, the lowest paid full-time member of the department, even as other colleagues' similar salary compression was partially remedied. This meant that I first learned of TSEU at the moment when the \$32/month union dues were exactly the kind of non-essential bills my partner and I were going about eliminating as inflation topped eight percent and my salary grew by exactly \$545 in half a decade. By then, I was more than certain TSEU couldn't help me.

Even so, I believe that had TSEU ever recruited me by handing me a donut and a brochure, I would have joined. I had belonged to a union when I taught in Massachusetts, and that union provided me with cost-of-living increases, assurances of academic freedom, restrictions on class sizes and course preps, none of which I enjoyed in Texas. If I had an inkling that an organization was at least trying to stick up for me and for all of us, and that I could join in this fight, I would've done so. In reality, a toxic boss, inhumane work culture, and the Covid-19 pandemic rendered me too scared to do anything, so that by now I think of TSEU as just another broken thing in Texas. Its phantom existence creates a situation in which the arduous steps of forming a union are impeded by the fact that a union already exists.

Texas' passage of the 2023 senate bills 17 and 18 demonstrate TSEU's contemporary impotence. SB17 catalyzed the dismantling of university DEI offices and multicultural centers and has led, at UNT, to the outlawing even of faculty affinity groups, such as the Black Faculty Network. SB18, meanwhile, made it easier to fire tenured faculty. TSEU held several rallies against these bills. Letters were written. Phone calls were made. But, both bills passed and went into effect on January 1, 2024. In their January 2024 "Update," TSEU claims that its members and allies helped to strip down SB18 given that tenure was not eradicated. But, a simpler explanation would be that even the most fascist state legislators understood the enormity of the financial hit the state would take if it outlawed tenure. And so, the legislature went ahead with an incremental measure, one that lessens the power of tenured faculty without producing quite as glaring headlines as full-scale obliteration would create. By TSEU's own admission, they were unable to stop or even significantly alter SB17 (Update).

So, in the short term, it's hard to see what value TSEU provides, other than as a black hole for members' agitation. This is a sad unwinding of an organization that has fought for nearly as long as I've been alive—since 1979—against Texas' advancing kleptocracy, holding the line for workers in multiple sectors, winning pay raises, and protecting pensions. In the 1980s,

TSEU was central to imagining a new, progressive Texas taking shape in Austin and elsewhere that catalyzed reforms to the state's history of racism and stratification: a state that actually might've stayed blue after electing Ann Richards, instead of sending George W. Bush, Rick Perry, and Greg Abbott to the governor's mansion; a state that might've kept Donald Trump from the Whitehouse.

Instead, over the last 20 years, TSEU's gains have become increasingly paltry, especially for university employees. In the late 1990s, university employees began to be carved out from state-wide raises. They are left out in 2005, 2007, and 2009 (History). More recently, in 2023, the state legislature refused pay raises for all public educators despite having a record-breaking \$33 billion surplus. TSEU's own public-facing record-keeping stops abruptly in 2015 (History). Since then, no new entries have been added to the website. And, while it's a truism amongst labor organizers that it's better to stage effectual campaigns than to have a slick website, it's also hard not to see TSEU's ten-year neglect of its own webpage as a sign of atrophy.

A union that is too narrowly focused can be attacked in ways designed to keep it from building coalitions. TSEU has the opposite problem. In a union representing all manners of public workers, the state has seemed to exploit the structural weakness of an organization spread too thin. The union runs the risk of losing on every front. In this way, TSEU mirrors Texas' vacuity. Pockets of neglect grow until they create the situation I experienced in which current union members perform outreach by telling prospective members not to join.

This reality calls into question the bit of wisdom Nolan offered me when I cornered him at Labor Notes. I introduced myself and quickly began to lament Texas higher ed employees' sorry situation. What's it going to take to turn things around, I asked as if he might offer some insight. Nolan seemed to sense that it would be hard to ditch me unless he acted fast. As he stood and walked away, he said, "It's always gonna be piecemeal." In the grand scheme he was of course correct; solidarity is more an asymmetric network than a coherent grid. Reflecting on TSEU's history, however, leads me to conclude that their broad campaigns for all public workers have been too diluted. For university faculty and others for whom TSEU has not delivered, it is fair to wonder if public sector labor organizing in Texas has been piecemeal enough.

6.

When planning this essay, initially I hoped for a silver bullet: something sleek and solid within the foreboding formlessness, a nascent movement or emerging leader whose efforts I could maybe amplify. I read a position paper by a researcher with the advocacy group Every Texan, who, on the heels of the pandemic, made the argument that K-12 educators are first responders and should therefore be granted the right to collectively bargain. But, when I talked to her on the phone, this researcher described her paper as "mostly a thought experiment" meant to help educators imagine new possibilities. She and the couple of K-12 union leaders I spoke with were certain that it would take a massive, pro-labor overhaul of the state legislature before collective bargaining for more public workers could ever be achieved.

While collective bargaining remains a pipedream, I wondered who might be attempting to strengthen TSEU from within. I imagined a person or small group seeking to make the union

a powerful force for collective begging at least. I thought that at Labor Notes I might track down this theoretical person, and that at Labor Notes we might learn that we had each traveled from Texas to Chicagoland with similar hopes.

The crazy thing is, I did meet the person I sought when a TSEU organizer at a major Texas university happened to sit down next to me at the Caddyshack-themed hotel bar on the conference's first night. This was the very person an AFSCME organizer had told me was starting to organize around savvy reforms in the attempt to make TSEU more formidable on his campus. One of Labor Notes' initiatives is to train younger organizers to reform their ossified unions from within. This was the guy who was attempting that on his campus for TSEU.

He just sat down next to me, and we began to complain about all things Texan. We complained about our colleagues' misguided individualism. We complained about the lack of shared union history to draw upon when attempting to form a functional union. We complained about the ever-present fear employees have of being labeled a bad apple. He complained that for all my complaining I had not bothered to join TSEU. I complained that TSEU sucked so bad I couldn't justify the \$384/year it would've cost me to join. We complained about TSEU's board of directors being comprised entirely of retirees.

He had a broad mustache and wore a ball cap. We were on our second beers before I put together that he was in fact the person I'd wanted to track down. By the time I did, we had overshared to the point that I understood it would be dubious for me to profile him. He had talked shit about TSEU's leadership. He had copped to feeling defeated and hopeless.

Also, he told me that his university position was becoming remote. He would be moving to the east coast over the summer. He felt relieved to be leaving. He hoped eventually to find a different job in his new city and to quit his remote Texas university job as soon as possible. If whatever new job was unionized, he would be glad, but he would probably never again attempt to lead a union.

7.

I left Labor Notes more enthusiastic about union organizing than ever, and also more disconnected from the possibility of it. If anything, the conference exacerbated my feeling that all I had was my own struggle. Powerful unions were *over there*, and I was in Texas. The service industry and manufacturing unions making strides in the state didn't apply to me. The union that I could join was arguably worse than having no union at all.

In light of this, the workshop led by CWA-TN that I'd attended toward the end of the conference, became the most salient and also most problematic to consider. The workshop was led by Melanie Barron, a CWA organizer who supports campus workers in the southeast and has made her career "building union infrastructure in impossible places." Barron focused on how employees in situations like mine could "step into power." The strategies she presented had names such as "Winning without Bargaining," "Campaigning as an Invitation to Struggle," and designing campaigns that manage to be "Small Enough to Win, Big Enough to Matter." The point was to bob and weave, to normalize ongoing protest, and to never put the union in a position to lose outright. Instead of advocating for a specific pay raise, a union in this situation was better off arguing for raise increases "on moral terms, and with no deadline," Barron said.

“You have to get beyond win or lose,” “you have to focus not on individual grievance, but on systemic grievance,” and, most importantly, you have to create a situation in which “anything good the state does you can claim as a win,” she said.

We did an activity devoted to adopting this mindset. In pairs, we considered our own working situations and tried to re-envision campaigns beyond the win/lose dichotomy and instead focused on an “open-ended demand rooted in human dignity.” With my partner, a guy who worked for Google in Boston, I imagined revising TSEU’s unmet demand for a ten percent across-the-board raise for all university employees, and instead focus on fostering more equality for contingent faculty, in the form of more job stability and more access to privileges enjoyed by tenure-track faculty. The rest of the worksheet helped me discern possible effects of this shift. Focusing on these lesser, but more realizable demands, might invite whole departments to advocate for our most exploited members. Potentially, this would lead to faculty becoming accustomed to advocating for fairness, for more powerful seats at the bargaining table, more inclusive relationships among different tiers of employees, and maybe even more equity between employees with different classifications. At the very least, it might lead to the more equitable sharing of office space and course assignments.

In the bigger picture, such changes could help set the conditions for a different relationship to my job and my colleagues, or, in Barron’s words: “New opportunities for worker protagonism.” This was the closest I got to joining Labor Notes’ formula with my own situation. By the end of the workshop, I felt closer to embracing the oft-repeated adage “YOU are the Union.” I could imagine talking with my closest coworkers about adopting this shift of mindset, eventually branching out to more members of my department.

It was both invigorating and sobering to consider myself not held apart from worker solidarity, but already on the path toward it. On the one hand, maybe none of my desires were as far-off as I thought. On the other, to consider myself already on the path was to acknowledge exactly how daunting—how long, how arduous—following this path would be. While CWA’s tactics *could* reshape workers’ relationships with each other and their institutions, these tactics suggested a shadow side as well, in which “struggle” might more accurately be called “toil,” and in which that toil would be never-ending and inadequate. Either way, it would mean working more, not less, and it would mean further dissolving whatever firewalls one erects between social life and work life.

The phrase “work-life balance” is not one I heard at Labor Notes. To some extent this is for good reason: Workers’ relationships to their employers are so unbalanced that workers need union intervention to achieve a better balance, and the phrase itself is mostly a management talking point. That said, in Labor Notes’ vision, one’s time becomes unaccountable. Instead, the definition of labor is stretched wide enough to include workers’ quasi-spiritual quest for fairness. Labor Notes is not, after all, arguing for the abolishment of capitalism. It is not arguing for government guaranteed income, nor is it advocating for government ownership of industry. In short, Labor Notes does not agitate for the end of exploitation, just less of it.

It is only inside our capitalist reality that this approach makes sense, and it is only in the context of the monadism fostered by capitalism that union membership could provide not only an apparatus for fighting the boss but also function as a place of belonging and deep meaning for individual members. Ultimately, Labor Notes does not seek to unseat the god of money so

much as it offers workers a more enticing sanctuary in which to proactively serve that god. Even so, this is the church to which I would most like to belong.

8.

In the end, this is the only choice: whether or not to belong. Labor Notes made me more determined to seek community in struggle than persist further into isolation. Although unions work to reform and not abolish capitalism, the communities of mutual support that they foster are anti-capitalist in essence. Maybe belonging for belonging's sake is a hard sell, but, while I remain daunted by the huge energy required for even minor victories, the chance to belong is the real and enduring win.

Back in Texas, I could recognize the ways in which activist groups around me were already attempting much of what Barron and her CWA-TN co-panelists had suggested in their workshop. A local group called No Bus Cuts had been protesting the city's replacement of buses and bus routes with an on-demand rideshare program run by a private vender. The Young Democratic Socialists who I met on campus the week before Labor Notes were helping local service workers build union campaigns in their workplaces. A coalition of still more activist groups, including TSEU, were continuing a long-running Raise the Wage campaign for the lowest paid university employees.

The more I learned about it, the more the Raise the Wage campaign became a litmus test for me. Raise the Wage seeks to support the lowest-paid university employees, in food service and elsewhere, who in 2023 made just over \$9/hour when a livable wage in North Texas was at least \$18/hour. These employees' wage increased nearly two dollars between 2020 and 2023, when it was barely \$7/hour. Neal Smatresk, UNT's then-president, got annihilated for celebrating this two dollar raise on social media. It was hard to see this paltry gain in the way Barron had urged us to think of it: a momentary victory.

Given what I've described, it may not be surprising that soon after Labor Notes I decided to leave Texas. I was offered and accepted a new position as a lecturer in the University of Minnesota system—on a campus whose faculty remain non-unionized despite its existence in a relatively pro-union state. Even so, I found it wildly more compelling to leave Texas than to stick around. In almost every way I could think of, it was better for my career, my health, and my family not to belong in Texas.

Before the semester ended at UNT, I met with the person whose example I hope to follow on my next stop. Over the years, my English department colleague Deb Armintor had become a local activist. She had served several terms on the city council as its most leftist, most outspoken member, an undertaking that earned her the moniker "Dangerous Deb." Since relinquishing her seat, she'd been involved in all the local campaigns I've mentioned, and more, including efforts to decriminalize marijuana, and advocacy for ending hiring discrimination against those with criminal records. We talked about how her activism got started. She described being denied tenure by the department chair who had preceded the department chair with whom I'd had the displeasure of working. That chairperson had denied her tenure case for no reason that she could see, and his decision was eventually overturned when she appealed. After prevailing, Armintor had a thought that was mirror opposite of my own: that she would "stay forever and fight these bastards on everything." And that was what

she had proceeded to do, in ways that took her increasingly away from our petty intradepartmental politics and into battle against systems of inequality in the local community and in greater Dallas-Fort Worth. She told me she didn't really have hope for ever making things better. Instead, she spent her time thinking about problems and how to solve them (Armintor). She was exhausted by this, but also, she had so many friends. Activism had become her manner of existence.

About the same time I talked with Armintor, UNT's Young Democratic Socialists held the last of their Labor April meetings. This time the classroom was packed. Nearly 50 students gathered to hear from a UAW member who had led a successful strike against the General Motors plant in nearby Carrollton, and from beer brewers involved in a strike against Molson-Coors in Fort Worth, a strike they, too, would soon win. The UAW speaker gave the brewers advice about tactics. The students volunteered to walk the picket lines with the brewers. The brewers talked about how the students could start to organize within a local grocery store chain where several of them worked.

That this all happened inside a classroom at a public university was the only connection between these dynamic private sector campaigns and lackluster public sector organizing that is needed by Texas public employees. But, it was a start toward envisioning how that divide might be crossed—bridged by people like Armintor, people working together, agitating, demanding. I imagined a similar meeting, to be held further down the road, about the struggle for improved conditions for faculty, staff, and students—a meeting that could take place with or without participation by TSEU.

When the Labor Notes April meeting was over, we filed out for a group picture in the same hallway I'd spent so many years walking alone. The brewers stood in the front with a banner urging a boycott of Molson-Coors products. The rest of us stood around them. In the resulting photo, the lighting is terrible, but the message is powerful: There are many of us, and we are standing shoulder to shoulder.

Weeks later I would drive a moving truck 1000 miles north in hopes of standing shoulder to shoulder with new colleagues somewhere else.

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Adjunkt: A Play with No Acts



Joel Smith

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Artist's Statement

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

The more things change, the more they stay the same – Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, 1849

To chart the “Futures” of contingency and tenure, it can be useful to dig into the stratigraphy of the past. The initial version of the short play you are about to read came into being in 2015 during the lead-up to [National Adjunct Walkout Day](#). At the time, Tom Miller—whose white paper is the inspiration for this issue—and I were unlikely allies at the University of Arizona; he was the Vice Provost of Faculty Affairs and I was an adjunct in the same department. We often went back and forth in the media that year, such as in the following article:

“Our two main priorities are pay equity and the job security of multi-year contracts,” said Joel Smith, an adjunct and organizer in the University of Arizona English department. University of Arizona adjuncts participated in the walkout by taking their students to an on-campus plaza for a demonstration and discussions about adjuncts in higher education...Tom Miller, Vice Provost of Faculty Affairs at the University of Arizona, reaffirmed the spirit of collaboration, saying that the adjunct situation ‘is not experienced here as a conflict between administration and faculty. I think it is experienced here as a challenge facing all faculty’ (Mortazavi, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/adjunct-walkout>).

Looking back, those were heady days full of action—walking out and teaching-in—even though things often felt stuck, like we were waiting for something or someone who would never arrive, a la Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*. I should note that while UA President Ann Weaver-Hart was invited to our NAWD teach-in, she neither came nor acknowledged the invitation.

Working in higher education so often felt (and feels!) existential and absurd, and so out of those twin impulses emerged *Adjunkt: A Play with No Acts*. Perhaps Tom’s and my unintentional “odd couple” routine became linked in my subconscious to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two minor characters plucked from Shakespeare and immortalized by Tom Stoppard, who was playing firmly in Beckett’s own groove. In my small, winking homage to

such literary giants, I began to sketch out Odessa and Ulric, who in some not-too-distant future sit on their front porch processing the adjunctification of everything as they wait for the garbage collector. In all three plays, the two main characters play word games and interrupt each other endlessly, yet so much remains unsaid as they must—like all of us—accept their fates. So where do they/we go from here? This issue of *Academic Labor: Research and Artistry* is about Futures, after all, and what warnings might Odessa and Ulric offer us?

More than even Beckett or Stoppard, I actually count Eugène Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* as the main inspiration for *Adjunkt*. While the timely threat of incipient fascism runs through *Rhinoceros* just as in *Godot*, I am equally interested in the idea of contagion in *Rhinoceros*, where two quasi-lovers, Bérenger and Daisy, navigate a world where the townsfolk, inexplicably, begin turning into rhinoceroses, and the disease appears to be catching. In our own late capitalist moment, adjunctification speaks to the disposability of labor, to the tearing of our social fabric, turning us all into, what, exactly? *Adjunkt* is a tragicomic cautionary tale, and like Odessa and Ulric—despite all their human foibles and limitations—let us take comfort in each other.

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Adjunkt: A Play with No Acts

Scene

Exurban front porch.

Time

Soon.

Scene ∅

(Curtains open. Couple sits on an electronic porch swing. They are of an indeterminate age. The front door is blocked by a pile of bagged trash. A rolled up brochure sits on top, like a short length of plastic pipe or a scroll in some almost forgotten language.)

ODESSA

The garbage collector is late.

ULRIC

Is pickup today?

ODESSA

They promised us an adjunkt this month.

ULRIC

No one has shown.

ODESSA

And they tell us we don't need full-clockers.

ULRIC

Not no one. I shouldn't say *no one* has shown.

ODESSA

Why shouldn't you?

ULRIC

Shouldn't I?

ODESSA

Say so.

ULRIC

Two inspector-administrators did walk by. Or rather, rode by, in their golf carts. One at a time, in short succession. The second administered the first. Said they were forming a search committee to hire a third. They left a pamphlet.

(ULRIC stretches out his legs, resting on the pile of black trash bags, and gestures at the rolled up brochure with his foot. ODESSA picks it up, flattens it out and begins to read.)

ODESSA

"Seeking purpose? Waiting on the arbiter? You, too, can collect garbage. One day per month, free from contracts, the work therewith, its own reward."

ULRIC

Who do they take us for?

(ODESSA sighs, rolls the brochure up, and sets it back on the bagged pile of trash.)

ODESSA

It is urgent and necessary work.

ULRIC

An adjunkt should never refuse refuse. Especially on a pleasant day such as this. All we can do is wait, I suppose.

(ULRIC sets his feet on the porch floor.)

So efficient, this new swing. Outstanding.

ODESSA

Shall we turn it on?

ULRIC

What else can we do?

(ULRIC moves bags aside to reach the ON switch. The electronic swing starts up. A generator whirs unevenly.)

Minimal exertion. No wasted leg or torso movement.

ODESSA

But at what cost? It seems—

ULRIC

Seems, madam? No, it is. I know not seems.

ODESSA

You steal from the Bard who wrote that line.

ULRIC

Or else one of his adjunkt playwrights.

ODESSA

Indeed, the poets were first to go.

ULRIC

Nurses next, if you recall. Then comics, like myself.

ODESSA

Corpora College could have tried harder to stop it. They could have hired more full-clockers.

(The porch swing lurches into a higher gear and knocks over a trash bag. Yellowed newspapers and broken e-readers tumble out. A path to the front door is cleared.)

ULRIC

What about the METAheads and Xcels? They bear responsibility, too, no?

ODESSA

The Rankers could have changed their algos. Instead, they rewarded Corpora College for paying low, firing at whim.

ULRIC

The elites got rich and student debt mushroomed.

ODESSA

Ranking spread to all parts of life.

ULRIC

Negative externalities be damned.

ODESSA

Negative eternalities. This all happened so long ago, now.

ULRIC

The futurists should have thought about us, far downriver from them.

ODESSA

Adjunktivitis is a downriver syndrome.

ULRIC

Worse than down—

ODESSA

Hush, Ulric. That joke is in poor taste, even for a "comic" such as yourself. The garbage collector may still come.

ULRIC

With less debt, we might've had children, you and I. Now it is too late.

ODESSA

And our interest is yet unpaid. We will die before that happens.

(ULRIC becomes silent, downcast. He stands, climbs over the pile of trash, goes inside the house offstage. There is a shuffling of papers. The generator emits a spark, and the swing belches smoke.)

ULRIC

Here I am.

ODESSA

Where did you go?

ULRIC

To check the pickup schedule.

ODESSA

And?

ULRIC

It is difficult to parse.

ODESSA

Try.

ULRIC

The new adjunkt arrives in a fortnight, to replace the current. The current was fired the week before last, so as not to become benefit-eligible. The interim suspects they will not be paid, and so doesn't clock in at all.

(As ULRIC speaks, the swing revs faster and louder. It knocks aside bags of trash. ODESSA stands.)

ODESSA

Speak up, I cannot hear.

(The swing makes a horrible whirring. Ulric continues.)

ULRIC

(yelling, now)

Starting between the 1st and 5th, the new hire will drive their own truck in the morning and Corpora's at night, to split overhead. No verbal agreements. There is much daylight between the parties.

(ODESSA shuts off the swing. The smoke dissipates and trash bags settle.)

ODESSA

Was that verbatim?

ULRIC

Hardly a word.

ODESSA

Then how do you know what adjunkt garbage collectors face?

ULRIC

You want to talk of faces? The aims of Corpora College have become naked, plain to read. It reminds me of what the Spanish painter said: are we to paint what's on the face, what's inside the face, or what's behind it?

ODESSA

That is quite astute, for an out-of-work comic. Your value always exceeded your pay.

ULRIC

My kinderadjunkts taught me well.

ODESSA

I've heard that bit already. Each day, they hired a new teacher, fresh from the academy, to teach one single lesson.

ULRIC

"All were occupied," they said.

ODESSA

"Ergo, efficient," they said. Ulric, tell me one I haven't heard before.

ULRIC

As you wish, Odessa. This story comes from my Maw Maw's childhood. At the intersection of two roads stood a hardware store.

ODESSA

A what?

ULRIC

A depot for goods, until 3D printers. And all day long at this crossroads waited professors, of Rumi and Quantum States, desperate for work.

ODESSA

With no contracts to speak of?

ULRIC

None. Day laborers, they. Maw Maw hoped to see one jump onto the back of a self-driving truck. Funny thing was, no truck ever came.

ODESSA

Is that funny?

ULRIC

I do not know.

(The two sit, waiting for the smoke to fully clear.)

ODESSA

How the trash begins to smell when the swing is off.

(After a time, she turns the swing back on. It hums quietly.
Curtains close.)