

Theme 2. Precarity and Failed Advocacy

Here, we move into the subterranean elements of writing center work; the seedy, stressful, less-often discussed elements. This entire section is anonymous by the contributors' decision. This section serves as a sort of dark reflection on the previous section and the section that follows it: many of the narratives here encapsulate extended periods and even careers in writing center work, and all of them share instances where the metalabor of advocating for their centers and their work has failed them. Writing center labor is often precarious—especially for the many who are contingent workers. Although we shared an overview of the scholarship on labor in writing centers in Act I, here we pause to note the great deal of work emerging in recent years dealing specifically with contingent labor. Lerner (2009) found the birth of writing centers in 1894 to be tied directly to contingent labor. Isaacs and Knight (2017) found that contingent labor in writing centers had only grown since then, finding that 71 percent of writing center directors held non-tenure-track positions by 2017 (p. 48). Fels (2017) drew on this statistic to examine the relationship between contingency and precarity among writing center directors, arguing that “71 percent of our colleagues walk a fine line between having a job and experiencing the hardships that come with unemployment. Once someone higher up the food chain decides to eliminate or drastically change a director's position, very little can be done to save it, and nothing we say matters will” (p. 128). Many of the stories in this section echo Fels' (2017) sentiment and the work of others (Naydan, 2017; Fels et al., 2021; Herb et al., 2023), making clear the stakes of our institutional precarity and the risks that come with the field's failure to organize.

In “I've Got a Secret,” an anonymous, long-time writing center director discussed their precarity and the ways in which their line changes over the years have brought them little stability despite profound success in the national professional arena of writing center work. At the end of their career, the contributor reflects on how contingency has shaped their work and advocates for changes to our profession to protect contingent workers, most especially in labor organizing.

The anonymous “Into and Out of the Tutoring Center,” describes how one administrative decision can upend a writing center director's job with deleterious effects. And, while the story starts off as a cautionary tale about ignorant colleagues, it has a surprisingly positive ending. Here, advocacy—but also a lot of distance on the part of the contributor/director—helps them to navigate the (temporary) loss of their writing center.

“Writing Center as a Life Raft” provides a different cautionary tale from another anonymous contributor, demonstrating that precarity is not limited to contingent faculty and staff members. It highlights the fact that even tenured and decorated members of the field are subject to similar pressures and austerity politics:

no one in the neoliberal university, regardless of positioning, is immune to its whims. Both this and the prior story reveal the effects of the managed university wherein supposedly economically marginal (but crucial) areas are under-resourced and micromanaged in favor of shorter-term “returns on investment.”

The last story—“Counterstory: Ignored Labor with a Writing Center”—details the ways in which a writing center worker can sometimes fail to make headway in their job. Here, we follow Lan Wang-Hiles as she navigates experiences of being disempowered but also exploited because she has writing center expertise but is only called upon in very limited situations to interact with tutors. Wang-Hiles tries again and again to teach her colleagues and administrators about writing center best practices, but to no avail.

So many of us have felt similarly silenced, sidelined, and unappreciated for our knowledge and our labor. These stories—from a wide array of writing center workers in contingent and tenure track positions—show us how precarity lurks in our profession. In offering unflinching and honest descriptions of the kind of loss one feels when confronted with losing one’s writing center, or one’s job, these stories demonstrate the importance of critical distance from our work and the need for more advocacy for writing center workers.

Discussion Questions

- It was tempting for us to put “I’ve Got a Secret” in the career trajectory section. That said, this narrative has a laser-like focus on precarity and contingent labor in a way that the narratives in Career Trajectories did not necessarily share. As you read this section, would you group it with those narratives? Is there something unique to contingent positions that definitionally differentiates them from more faculty-oriented positions? Despite having been contingent for over 30 years, the narrator has remained in their position; how is this different from the conditions described in “From Dream Job to Unsustainable”?
- “Into and Out of the Tutoring Center” demonstrates the often-mercurial whims of administrators when it comes to reporting lines for writing centers. Like “I’ve Got a Secret,” this narrative also demonstrates how bound up in institutional politicking and relationships the positioning of a writing center can be. In what ways can aspiring WCDs be better prepared to answer and adapt to changing lines of reporting, department/area housing, or other drastic changes to the conditions of the position? What sorts of metalabor are demonstrated in this narrative and how are they unique from those described in, say, Sockwell Johnston’s narrative in beginning a new center?
- While contingency is a major sub-theme in this section, “Writing Center as Life Raft” demonstrates that even tenured writing center administrators are subject to precarity in the managed university. This particular story

was shared a few years before the recent, shocking cuts to faculty lines and departments at WVU (among other colleges and universities) in 2023. It has become increasingly clear that traditional conceptions of stability no longer hold true in this context. What can be done to better prepare newcomers to the field for these vicissitudes? How do we reckon with the “grand narratives” of being rewarded for personal sacrifice and hard work being shattered as it was for this contributor? What new narratives emerge? What narratives should emerge?

- Lan Wang-Hiles’ story is in many ways an interesting inversion of a typical writing center narrative: rather than a contingent director or staff member expected to also teach courses, Wang-Hiles is a tenured faculty member who has tried to advocate for her university’s center despite it being moved away from her home department and purview. What are the implications of the often-messy results of cross-area reporting and responsibilities? For example, Wang-Hiles teaches the tutor training course but finds the conditions dictated by its positioning sometimes at odds with the field’s best practices. In this case, her university’s center was supervised by someone who wasn’t an expert. How might the field advocate for expertise and credentialing without gatekeeping? What are the consequences if we do not?