Guest Editors' Introduction:

Cross Roads, not Cross Purposes: Contingency, Vulnerability, and Alliances in the Contemporary Writing Program

BECAUSE YOU'RE READING THIS ISSUE OF *OPEN WORDS*, YOU PROBABLY already recognize—and we hope, resist—the exploitation of contingent labor in English and Writing departments and programs. Because our journal focuses on access issues, you also understand that contingent labor and access are connected in complex ways that people who struggle with only one or the other often miss. We wish you didn't already know this. We wish you didn't need to. We wish the long history of really smart people writing dozens of books, articles, position papers, reports, and manifestos had led to the changes their authors hoped for.

Just a few quick examples:

- The Modern Language Association's Academic Workforce Advocacy Kit features links to fourteen different reports, statements and surveys since 2006 arguing for more ethical and humane hiring and staffing practices. See *http://www.mla.org/advocacy_kit*.
- The National Council of Teachers of English endorsed a strong set of recommendations from its College Section Steering Committee in 2010, ranging from calls for adequate office space, to full shared-governance and voting rights, to long-term and, where possible, permanent appointments. See *http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/contingent_faculty*.
- In November 2011, an American Association of University Professors panel issued a recommendation that contingent faculty have equal say in all aspects of shared governance.

The Association of Departments of English, Conference on College Composition and Communication, and other organizations have all issued similar calls. We don't mean to diminish the effort and quality of those projects, but to point out the limit-situation, in Freirean terms, they butt up against. Put directly, the academy's—and most often English Departments'—exploitation of contingent labor is unethical, perhaps inhumane, and undercuts the very access to quality education that so often serves as the justification for doing it.

More positively, the collective national voice of contingent faculty grows louder and increasingly organized. The New Faculty Majority (*www.newfacultymajority.info*) has begun

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organizing events nationwide calling attention to contingent faculty exploitation. Adjunct Matters (www.adjunctmatters.org), along with public education efforts, is organizing a large-scale group insurance plan in which contingent faculty can participate. Contingent-labor activists Megan Fulwiler and Jennifer Marlowe expect to release *Con Jobs: Stories of Adjunct and Contingent Faculty* (www.conjobdoc.com), a documentary that adds volume and power to the national movement for contingent labor equity, in early Summer 2012.

Still, here we are. Contingent faculty continue to cobble together (for many, at best) multiple part-time assignments that add up to full-time schedules, but at low pay and without benefits. Widening access to higher education (at least ostensibly) is diversifying student populations at many institutions, while shrinking resources and so-called education reform strategies are undercutting our ability to respond to students' needs. Contingent faculty win occasional local victories, such as the conversion of fifty-five temporary full-time positions into tenure-track positions at Delta College in Michigan (Fain) or successful unionizing efforts here and there, but writ large conditions for contingent faculty show little promise of improving on their own. National efforts to link access to efficiency—in its most insidious neoliberal sense, represented by organizations like the US Education Delivery Institute (http://www.deliveryinstitute.org/)—only obscure the issues, a problem that just gets worse in the specific context of Composition Studies. Composition courses, including Basic Writing, are simultaneously charged with numerous and inconsistent goals (including the teaching of invention, grammar conventions, academic discourses, information literacy, revision strategies, genre knowledge, rhetorical flexibility, and more) and assessed in often epistemologically irrelevant—if not dishonest—ways (examples include timed writing exams that ignore instruction in writing process; machine-scored exams, both objective and essay; assessments based on syllabi and other documents that have little if any direct relationship to classroom practice or student performance; and so on). And all that on the backs of contingent faculty who can't and, as Bill Thelin points out in this issue, often won't contest the situation.

As much as we'd like to promise simple solutions and clarity, we can't. However, we believe the essays in this issue contribute to our field's collective understanding of both labor exploitation and access by putting them into relation with each other. Not every piece treats both problems at equal length. Some disagree about the nature and scope of the issues and advocate very different responses. Contributors certainly represent a wide range of institutions, experiences and positions—having taught in community colleges, religious institutions, and public comprehensive regional universities; having served as graduate instructors, some as contingent faculty, some as WPAs, some in K-12. Framed very differently—from the very personal to the departmental to the disciplinary—these essays contest the easy assumption

that allies need to agree on a program of changes. "We're all in this together" does not equal "We all want or need the same answers." What's more, they resist the competing urges either to cure only the symptoms or to offer hortatory calls that are impossible to act on.

In "Structuring the Color Line Through Composition," Jason Evans describes the "contradictory practices" of community colleges: offering access to vulnerable populations while being de-funded and staffed more and more with contingent labor. Thus, despite its ostensible purpose, Composition at the community college actually maintains the educational color line, as historically disenfranchised students become frustrated by courses and instruction unattuned to their needs and contexts.

From an administrative perspective, Sara Webb-Sunderhaus, in "Me and the Adjuncts," examines connections among retention problems, curriculum, and contingent labor at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, where she serves as Basic Writing Coordinator. She explores ways in which programs can improve writing instruction and increase retention while neither abusing their contingent workforce nor assuming that all contingent faculty have the same professional goals. She urges us to remember that "we need a better understanding that conditions are not the same everywhere, and we should avoid assuming that there is one ideal solution to the problems of contingent labor."

Bill Thelin's "Memos, Email, and Reports: Writing to and Being Written by Adjunct Faculty" articulates the difficulties of balancing the "administrative agenda" of programmatic quality and integrity with the complex rhetorical and ethical problem of speaking to a staff of contingent faculty whose needs and concerns vary widely. Reflecting on his work as the WPA in an open-admissions institution, he often found himself in "a situation where communication of policies and changes risks disrupting morale and teaching, as such alterations, often by necessity unilateral administrative decisions, remind the adjuncts of their status," that is, unintentionally reinforcing the powerlessness of contingent faculty to affect their own conditions.

Amy Lynch-Biniek, who has served as an adjunct faculty member, graduate instructor, WPA, Writing Center director, and faculty member at a comprehensive public university, asks the question "Who Is Teaching Composition?" Her multiple perspectives come into focus when she frames the question in disciplinary terms. The majority of writing courses are being taught by contingent faculty, most of whom do not have significant training in Composition. Therefore, higher education's labor system hinges upon both the exploitation of flexworkers and the position that Composition studies itself is adjunct. Hiring practices suggest that disciplinary knowledge is unnecessary to teach writing, perhaps better qualifying one for administrative work, the significance of which Lynch-Biniek and Webb-Sunderhaus disagree on. While Webb-Sunderhaus contends that writing programs can only benefit from elevating

specialists into administrative ranks, Lynch-Biniek cautions that quarantining compositionists in administrative positions removes important specialized knowledge from classrooms and, as Bill Thelin echoes, devalues disciplinary expertise.

Finally, Marcia Bost provides us with the perspective of a contingent faculty teaching freshman Composition for fifteen years, many at a private Christian college serving mostly non-traditional students. Her very personal account of "Moments in the Stream" vividly depicts the difficulties of navigating the needs of her students, the demands of the institution, the attitudes of the permanent faculty, her growing family, and her own professional development. In doing so, Bost certainly finds some "psychic reward" in the work, which Bill Thelin cautions against letting override concerns about adjunct working conditions.

We sincerely believe that the disagreements among contributors to the issue—not to mention the number of topics our contributors gloss or leave unaddressed—do not simply reinforce the sense of intractability that so many academic labor activists struggle with; instead, we expect those differences to help activists and decision-makers at all ranks and levels refract our thinking in ways that wouldn't have occurred to us otherwise, expanding our sense of options rather than convincing us that none of them will work.

We believe that in the era of "We are the 99%," teachers and students have an opportunity. Contingent teachers are the new faculty majority; students facing economic, educational and cultural barriers can no longer logically be called "nontraditional." We are not writing about the margins anymore, but about the new mainstream: contingent workers and vulnerable students. We see a chance for alliances; the collective voices in this issue represent that hope.

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