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TOWARD A RHETORIC OF LABOR ACTIVISM IN COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTERS[1]

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Abstract

This essay considers the present degree of the writing center field's engagement with labor activism in the age of the corporate university and argues that writing center practitioners are well positioned to *reconstitute* their identities: to re-envision themselves and their colleagues as poised to engage in activist rhetorics and live lives as academic activists. By employing a rhetoric of labor activism and thereby addressing labor issues in more robust ways alongside professional organizations that represent them, writing centers can work to revitalize shared governance and academic freedom, both of which are threatened by corporatizing forces, and they can influence emergent institutional and professional histories.

Labor movement activists and academics often sustain rhetorical strategies that exist in apparent juxtaposition with one another, and this juxtaposition manifests as problematic in an era that has witnessed the rise of the corporate university as scholars such as Marc Bousquet and Henry Giroux have theorized it—a university that, according to Bousquet, has "embraced the values and practices of corporate management" to produce "the return of the sort of dizzying inequalities formerly associated with the Gilded Age," especially in the field of rhetoric and composition (*How the University Works* 1). The labor movement makes arguments to an audience of current and prospective activists, and those arguments place value on solidarity and equality, not on hierarchical and oppressive power structures. Labor activists readily engage in actions with picket signs. They readily chant about better pay and better working conditions. As actions like the 2011 revolution in Egypt suggest, activists increasingly make use of digital media, most notably Twitter and Facebook, to convey their messages to a global audience. They want their arguments to get attention. The boldness of their argumentation distinguishes their arguments as attention-getting to supporters and perhaps abrasive to opponents. Yet, in certain ways, the kind of bold argumentation on which activists rely stands in stark contrast to the decorous rhetoric that academics at increasingly corporate universities may manifest via tempered and researched arguments. Academics write articles and conference papers that eschew personal opinion for rigorous and supposedly objective analysis; they write papers not unlike this essay that, in form and function, generally uphold traditional notions of what counts as academic. Although conservatives readily attack academia as a bastion of liberalism and although plenty of academics certainly identify as activists of the sort that Patricia M. Malesh and Sharon McKenzie Stevens describe in *Active Voices: Composing a Rhetoric for Social Movements* or of the sort that Linda Adler-Kassner gestures toward in *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*, there nonetheless exists a palpable tension between the controlled decorum that characterizes certain academics at American colleges and universities and the potentially (and perhaps ideally) radical rhetoric of labor activism. And there exists a palpable tension especially for contingent academic workers who would benefit from engagement with both labor activist and academic discourse communities.

This essay considers the problem of contingent writing center workers who "serve in insecure, unsupported positions with little job security and few protections for academic freedom" ("Contingent Faculty Positions"). I position rhetoric as a means by which contingent writing center workers can begin the process of solving the problems associated with contingency in the age of the corporate university. I examine the present degree of the writing center field's rhetorical engagement with labor activism, and, in turn, I argue that writing center practitioners might engage in an activist rhetoric that is evocative of Harry C. Denny's conception of writing centers as potential "advocates (or activists) for change in academic culture" (*Facing* 26). Building on Rita Malenczyk's *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators* and especially Seth Kahn's "What is a Union?" chapter in Malenczyk's collection, I suggest that writing center practitioners are well positioned by way of the attention that they inherently pay to language to *reconstitute* their identities: to re-envision themselves and their colleagues as poised to engage in activist rhetoric and live lives as academic activists. In particular, these practitioners are able to engage in a process of reconstitution if the international, national, and regional professional organizations that connect them—namely the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) and the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (NCPTW)—more explicitly acknowledge the realities of practitioners' working conditions and more fully adopt the language and values of the labor movement. By employing a rhetoric of labor activism and thereby addressing labor issues in more robust ways, writing centers and the organizations that represent them can work to revitalize shared governance and academic freedom, which are currently threatened by corporatizing forces. They can influence emergent institutional and professional histories. Hence they can counter dominant narratives of education and professionalism and recast both education and professionalism as always already activist enterprises.

Writing Center Rhetorics and the Corporate University

Writing centers and the professionals who work in them sustain a dynamic connection to labor history. As evidenced by Kenneth Bruffee's work at the City University of New York (CUNY) in the 1970s, writing centers find their modern origins in the profoundly liberal history of open admissions and the labor changes—and in some cases labor exploitation—that ensued because of them. Amid the influx of students and arguably limited funding for skilled labor that open admissions created, peer tutoring as contemporary writing centers conceive of it was born. As CUNY faculty held "classes in rented store fronts and trailers" and "[took] turns at shared desks" while students "shunn[ed] jammed libraries to study in telephone booths," students at CUNY and elsewhere at colleges with open admissions began, to quote Elizabeth H. Boquet, "to inhabit" the writing center ("Open Admissions" 81; 53). They began "to hang hand-lettered renditions of favorite quotations on the wall, to jot down jokes on the board, to leave their own work on the tables while answering a question" (Boquet 53). They shaped the field's pedagogical perspective on collaborative learning in profound ways; perhaps they also came to exist as staples of writing centers because of real or strategically manufactured funding shortages: because there weren't enough faculty members to provide sufficient mentoring to the many students who were attending college at this key historical moment in academic labor history.

In turn, the rhetorics that writing center professionals employ in certain ways evoke the connection to the world of labor, and there came to exist then, as there exists now, a commonality between the rhetoric of organizing—a complement to activist rhetoric that should not be conflated with activist rhetoric—and the rhetoric of tutoring. Veteran organizer Lee Staples's portrayal of organizing rhetoric in *Roots to Power: A Manual for Grassroots Organizing* effectively illustrates the commonality between organizing rhetoric and writing center rhetoric.[2] As Staples suggests, "[t]he best organizers," meaning individuals who identify and bring together activists for collective action that builds power, "will have the ability to listen as well as the capacity to motivate, often being able to help someone finish what they've just begun to say" (9). Hence they function much like the best writing center consultants, who must listen well to writers' ideas and concerns. Furthermore, like "[m]uch of the work" in which an organizer engages "can be done by the skillful use of Socratic questioning" that enables members to "make their own decisions and hopefully become more involved than when someone simply gives them an answer," writing center consultants often ask key open-ended questions to get writers thinking and writing (Staples 11). And, of course, Staples observes that it is "the organizer's job to get *other* people"—namely activists—involved and eager "to take the lead" in notably different ways than organizers might take the lead (8). They function much like the best writing center consultants, who aim to create space for writers' voices and ideas instead of overwhelming writers with their own ideas and voices. In other words, both organizers and writing consultants aim to create conditions in which others take the lead.

Although writing center rhetoric very much dovetails with a rhetoric of organizing, writing centers, writing center scholars, and the professional organizations that represent them sustain thorny relationships with activist rhetoric. Activist rhetoric is a notably different rhetoric from organizing rhetoric, and it also conflicts with academic rhetoric. This thorny relationship between activist and academic rhetoric exists even though Jackie Grutsch McKinney argues that writing center professionals shape a master narrative of writing centers as "*comfortable, yet* *iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing*" (3). Certainly, writing centers, writing center scholars, and professional organizations consistently acknowledge the marginalized history or even present-day marginalized reality of writing centers: the source of the iconoclasm to which McKinney's scholarship speaks. Yet as a result, they also showcase a consistent concern with shaping writing center studies as a legitimate academic field within a corporate university setting that so values hierarchy. Denny perhaps best characterizes the sub-discipline's struggle for legitimacy in "Queering the Writing Center," observing that "[l]ike queer people, writing center professionals continually confront our marginality: we daily encounter students and faculty alike who approach our spaces with uneasiness" (264). And as Denny suggests in *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring*, "[j]ust as composition studies claims a good deal of victimhood by being positioned (or positioning itself) as a step-child in larger English Studies and literary scholarship, writing center academics can follow a similar path, viewing the field as further subsidiary, narrowly restricted to the pragmatics of day-to-day (or session-to-session) execution of practice" (5). As Denny continues, "writing center studies, like wider English studies, risks going the way of the Classics if we don't play an active role in making our field and the humanities relevant and vital to a post-industrial academy" (*Facing* 5).

In the face of a palpable anxiety about legitimacy and regardless of whether scholars see a reading of the writing center as marginal as a "tired" one, rhetorical approaches that scholars and professional organizations may employ can pander in ways to the values of the corporate university (Denny, *Facing* 5). The subtle but significant ways in which some contemporary writing center rhetoric reifies the rhetoric of the corporate university emerges in an array of modes and media that I consider here. For instance, this pandering rhetoric appears in ideas about what counts as scholarship—ideas that continue to evolve in writing center studies as calls for more replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) research emerge and as critiques of non-RAD research emerge. Consider, for example, Dana Driscoll and Sherry Wynn Perdue's "Theory, Lore, and More: An Analysis of RAD Research in *The Writing Center Journal*, 1980–2009," which acknowledges that "many writing centers continue to be staffed by graduate students and faculty 'transplants' from English literature programs" who have been "trained in the humanities" and not "the social sciences" (15). In their essay, Driscoll and Perdue call for writing center researchers to produce more RAD research and to "speak a common research language, one that allows others from both within and outside of our field to retrace our steps and test our claims" (35). Certainly, this suggestion speaks to a legitimate and exciting desire to improve writing center practice that emerges out of writing center scholarship. It aims, no doubt, to make the field better, as does a more tempered call for RAD research made in Rebecca Day Babcock and Terese Thonus's *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice*.[3] Yet these kinds of calls, too, function to alienate a cross-section of the writing center profession's workforce much like university administrations alienate adjunct faculty by identifying them as being in ways lesser than tenure-line faculty—as being non-researchers or lesser teachers as a result of the purported lack of research that they produce (even though plenty of adjuncts certainly produce research and get rave reviews as teachers).[4] Despite the good intentions of those who make them, these calls for RAD research inevitably devalue the professional backgrounds of writing center workers and the work that writing center workers do much like the corporate university ideologically and materially devalues the work done by writing teachers teaching first-year writing by paying poor wages and by withholding benefits and job security. As Bousquet observes, "[w]riting faculty generally work with diminished or nonexistent academic freedom protections, few resources, and often little acquaintance with the disciplinary knowledge of rhet-comp;" and as I extrapolate, some writing center faculty and staff also experience disenfranchisement from broader corporate university forces and perhaps, too, from colleagues who most value social-science approaches to research as opposed to humanities-based approaches (*How the University Works*

158). They experience disenfranchisement from colleagues who attempt to create insides and outsides of what counts as disciplinary knowledge and hence as the discipline.

Rhetoric that panders to corporate university interests likewise emerges in the materials that writing center professional organizations sometimes propagate. For instance, the IWCA's website for the most part ignores the labor crisis that has pervaded higher education since at least 2008, save a position statement from 1985 written by Jeanne H. Simpson titled "What Lies Ahead for Writing Centers: Position Statement on Professional Concerns." This statement addresses "the conditions under which we [as writing center professionals] work": conditions that are often "dreadful [...] not because administrators are intentionally making things difficult but because no one has a clear idea of how things should be" (Simpson). And, sadly, working conditions have not changed dramatically over the last thirty years even though talk of conditions appears to have dissipated, at least as the IWCA's website portrays it via its rhetoric of silence on the subject. The website also lacks even the kind of minimal support for candidates doing job searches provided by the Modern Language Association (MLA), an organization that has faced harsh criticism for its own lack of action regarding the labor crisis.[5] Whereas the MLA provides yearly reports on job availability, surveys involving the placement of Ph.D.s in language disciplines, and advice for jobseekers (however outdated that advice may be), the IWCA provides only a publically accessible jobs list and pays little attention to the problem of contingency. It therefore overlooks a key fact that Emily Isaacs and Melinda Knight report: that "writing centers are directed by people in non-tenure-track faculty positions predominantly (71%)" (48). Moreover, and notably not unlike the MLA's website, the IWCA's website sustains the primary rhetorical aim of attracting engagement in the profession. It does so even though the profession may be ill-equipped to provide jobs with fair labor conditions to all of those interested in it. It suggests a reality far removed from Denny's vision of the writing center's activist potential. To use McKinney's terminology, it suggests that we perhaps aren't as iconoclastic as some of us might like to believe.

Similarly, online materials produced by the NCPTW employ rhetorical strategies that subvert activist impulses and thereby subtly or overtly support the corporate university's initiatives. As Isaacs and Knight report, reinforcing Bousquet's sense of the field of rhetoric and composition as particularly prone to hiring contingent workers,[6] a high percentage of writing centers "[include] students in the mix of consultants" (49). Scholars of labor in rhetoric and composition have tended to characterize these student workers as an absent presence among contingent workers. Writing center professionals might see the profession as avoiding the reality that writing tutors are contingent workers in frequently articulated celebrations of the field and student workers' place in it. For instance, if you look at the websites via which we represent ourselves, we tout ourselves as "promot[ing] the teaching of writing through collaborative learning;" we tout "NCPTW professionals" as "leaders in collaborative approaches" who "[respond] to the challenges of creating and operating writing centers, developing innovative peer tutoring programs, and promoting the work of their peer tutors;" and we tout peer tutors as having "the opportunity to contribute in professional and scholarly ways to the larger writing center community" ("Welcome"). In other words, writing center administrators tell themselves that they help to provide undergraduate peer tutors with opportunities that are good for them because these peer tutors are learning. The notion that we provide these educational opportunities—opportunities that I certainly do see as beneficial—helps us to rest easy as we participate covertly in a very real sort of labor exploitation. This exploitation contributes to leaving those with Ph.D.s in hand out of work. It also contributes to leaving undergraduate peer tutors to either pay to work by virtue of paying tuition for tutor education courses or as grossly underpaid given the institutional necessity for and significance of their labor.

My critique of the absence of any indication of contingent status among undergraduate or graduate student tutors is not intended to suggest that any and every online space serves as the appropriate or ideal venue for explications of academic labor conditions. Indeed, not all online spaces serve as ideal outlets for activism But my critique does intend to draw attention to the fact that writing center professionals of all kinds have yet to find any *significant* rhetorical space to draw attention to contingency and labor movement questions. We have only a handful of scholarly articles that touch on the subject of contingency and writing centers, and most scholarly articles, like our websites, ignore the subject of contingency altogether. Even the seminal study "What They Take with Them: Findings from the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project"—a study that I want to stress that I very much admire—opts to laud writing centers for all the benefits that they provide to undergraduate tutors who inhabit them but makes not even the slightest gesture toward labor exploitation. Peer tutoring as part of a conversation about labor exploitation remains a taboo topic because it potentially undermines the work of writing centers. To echo McKinney, it undermines part of the master narrative that writing center practitioners like to create about themselves and propagate: the part that characterizes writing centers as "*comfortable*" places —places in which something like labor exploitation would never occur (3).

Possibilities through Rhetorical Reconstitution

Writing center practitioners must hold together the possibilities that 1) writing centers do important and exciting work, that 2) writing center professionals of all kinds benefit from their engagement with writing centers, and that 3) writing centers exist as spaces in which real labor exploitation can and does occur. But doing so requires a flexible mind and a critical one as well. Yet holding these ideas together produces a foundation for what rhetoricians have referred to as reconstitution, which Richard J. Jensen and John C. Hammerback define as the "process by which audiences redefine themselves" (128). In other words, reconstitution involves developing a new way of talking and thereby a new way of thinking about the self, and it often emerges as a result of conversational exchanges. Hence one rhetor can stimulate another rhetor to reconstitute her or his identity through conversation. Or a rhetor can reconstitute her or his own identity through engagement with the written word in digital spaces and in print. Jensen and Hammerback consider reconstitution in relation to activist Robert Parris Moses, arguing that "Moses's life prepared him to become a reconstitutive rhetor for civil rights" (128). In research more closely related to this consideration of labor, Mary E. Triece's "'Intelligent Worker': Rhetorical Reconstitution and the Influence of Firsthand Experience in the Rhetoric of Leonora O'Reilly" considers reconstitution in relation to labor identity. It argues that O'Reilly "rhetorically *reconstituted* her audience into a group of outspoken workers willing to agitate for workplace improvements" (6). Whereas Triece sees O'Reilly as fashioning her audience as an intelligent workforce of "strong-willed woman worker[s]," I suggest that writing center workers who are concerned about labor conditions must combat detrimental elitist attitudes that accompany the intelligent worker status that in many cases inherently accompanies academic jobs, be these jobs in or beyond writing centers (6). In other words, writing center workers concerned with labor justice might explore ways in which to organize colleagues who have yet to develop labor activist identities via reconstitution as O'Reilly used it, but toward a notably different end than she had in mind. They might reconstitute their fellow workers toward an end that finds commonality between labor activism and academic identity.

If writing center administrators or consultants seek to invite their colleagues to reconstitute their identities, they might do so by adopting the language of organizers and labor activists; they might do so by showcasing ways by which labor activist rhetoric dovetails with academic rhetoric. For instance, labor activists value collaboration and attention to language much like academics (especially those working in writing centers) do. They seek a collaborative means by which to determine the terms of their employment via collective bargaining, and they value the process of puzzling over language, which Kahn suggests by pointing out that "[c]ollective bargaining agreements have lots of moving parts—that is, seemingly unconnected sections/clauses of contract language" that "will impact each other in ways that can be very oblique, sometimes even inconsistent" (213). Moreover, labor activist rhetoric's commonality with academic rhetoric emerges in academic perspectives on labor such as those that Bousquet and Noam Chomsky put forth. Labor organizations that draw attention to the labor movement's proponents in academia reify the commonality between labor movement and academic rhetorics. For instance, events such as the 2010 Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions (CGEU) Conference at Stony Brook University that hosted Bousquet as the keynote speaker or the 12 July 2013 University of Michigan Graduate-Employees'-Organization and Lecturers'-Employee-Organization-sponsored talk by Noam Chomsky on the subject of "The Corporatization of the University" present the interplay between questions of labor and academic ways of thinking, speaking, and acting as academics concerned with labor manifest them via their academic work. Such events are persuasive to an audience of academics that perhaps feels skeptical about labor as a counter-academic force. They persuade all audiences that labor questions are part and parcel of academia and academic life, and hence they help to reconstitute a skeptical audience, providing that audience with rhetorical models for engaging in labor struggles as academics.

Other strategies exist for labor activists among writing center professionals who seek to begin the process of inviting non-activist professionals in the field to reconstitute their identities. These strategies involve employing labor activist rhetorics as part of the digital and physical faces of our centers. To make more of digital developments that characterize contemporary activism and contemporary writing centers, writing center websites might employ language relevant to the labor movement in opportune ways. For instance, they might draw attention to the contingent status that characterizes the majority of the field's workers as a nexus around which supporters of centers can take action. Instead of inviting writers who visit the writing center to evaluate consultants or services without a sense of the stakes, online evaluations might draw attention to the fact that jobs and funding for services depend on writers' evaluations and that evaluations can function as activist efforts of a subtle sort. Websites might also draw attention to the array of jobs that consultants hold—their full identities as workers in and beyond the writing center. And they might, too, draw attention to aspirations that writing center professionals have beyond the contingent jobs that, in many cases, help them to make ends meet. Finally, in order to reconstitute their own identities, writing centers might more readily celebrate overt activist rhetorics—the picket signs and the chants and the range of written and spoken language that have worked via the digital and non-digital world to create tangible social change. They might in overt and visible ways, by way of décor and events, show that to be an effective writer and rhetor very much means to be an agent of change on a local, state, national, or even global scale.

By way of reconstituted identities, writing center professionals will emerge as better equipped to revitalize both shared governance and academic freedom at the institutions that house them, key, interrelated components of academia's identity that have come under fire in subtle and overt ways in the age of the corporate university. Shared governance is the notion that faculty (and students such as peer writing consultants, I would add) should be involved in "personnel decisions, selection of administrators, preparation of the budget, and determination of educational policies," and it in large part emerges as a possibility because academic freedom exists at least in theory if not in practice ("Shared Governance"). It emerges because faculty who have the luxury of tenure's protection at least in theory feel free to speak about the ways in which their respective institutions should run. Perhaps because shared governance depends so much on academic freedom, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) identifies "[p]rotecting academic freedom" as its "core mission" ("Protecting Academic Freedom"). As the "1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*" suggests, the organization believes that "[t]he common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition" (Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure). Yet Bousquet observes that "[w]riting faculty generally work with diminished or nonexistent academic freedom protections" because of many writing programs' and English departments' reliance on non-tenure-line faculty to teach first-year writing (*How the University Works* 158). In turn, writing center professionals who perhaps altogether lack faculty status also sustain diminished or non-existent academic freedom. They sustain this diminished or non-existent academic freedom unless or until they reconstitute their identities to position themselves to work in activist ways for greater job security. They sustain this diminished or non-existent academic freedom unless or until they value themselves and their work enough to organize and conduct actions for post-secondary institutions to value them in tangible ways.

As writing center professionals reconstitute their identities to change dynamics involving academic freedom and shared governance at their respective institutions, they inevitably rework the narrative of their institutional histories as well as the narrative of writing center professionals broadly construed—the kind of narrative that McKinney theorizes. They shape education and professionalism in their most influential and inspiring forms as always already activist enterprises that seek to change the status quo. They provide a real-world incentive for dismantling at least part of the present master narrative as McKinney identifies it: the part that involves propagating an image of writing centers as wholly comfortable spaces. There exists nothing comfortable about labor exploitation or those who opt to ignore its subtle existence or avoid the inevitably uncomfortable work of countering it. There does, however, exist a possibility of a new kind of writing center and writing center history. In it, the writing center professional who exists presently as adjunct can earn fair pay and attain job security and thus emerge in material terms as wholly essential to the mission and future of the academy.

Notes

1. This article is a revised version of a presentation delivered with Dawn Fels, Clint Gardner, and Maggie Herb at the 2015 International Writing Centers Association Conference. I want to take this opportunity to sincerely thank my wonderful co-presenters for the great conversations we had and continue to have about labor in writing centers and for their comments on the shorter conference presentation version of my piece. Their feedback on my argument helped to make this article a reality.

2. See Liliana M. Naydan's "Leadership as Organizing in the Writing Center" for a discussion of the rhetorics of organizing and of tutoring writing.

3. As Babcock and Thonus put it, "writing center scholarship has been largely *artistic* or *humanistic*, rather than *scientific*, in a field where *both* perspectives can and must inform our practice. While theoretical investigations build the foundation for writing center studies, and anecdotal experience points in the direction of best practices, empirical research will create a credible link between the two" (3).

4. For example, consider the comments made by administrators in Amrutha Sivakumar's 19 March 2013 *Michigan Daily* article, "The Research Difference: How the University varies the value of faculty members."

5. Consider, for instance, the formation of MLA Democracy as a critique of the MLA. As MLA Democracy's website explains, "MLA Democracy is a spontaneous movement that aims to place activists into MLA governance and to ensure the organization is responsive to the concerns of all members" ("Occupy the Profession").

6. As Bosquet explains, "[u]nder the actually existing system of academic work, the university clearly does not prefer the best or most experienced teachers, it prefers the cheapest teachers. Increasingly that means the creation of nontenurable full-time instructorships and other casual appointments, a casualization that has unfolded unevenly by discipline and is especially pronounced in English and writing instruction" ("The Rhetoric of 'Job Market'" 222).

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