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## Contingency and Its Intersections in Writing Centers: An Introduction

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## Contingency and Its Intersections in Writing Centers: An Introduction

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In this special issue of *Writing Center Journal*—the first special issue in its history to focus exclusively on contingency in our field—we invite readers to consider the following questions: Who are the contingent workers who work in writing centers and how do contingent workers perceive their work? When writing center workers discuss contingency, whom or what do we talk about? And how do or how might our conversations about contingency relate to broader conversations about intersectional identity and social justice in our discipline?

We know that 71% of writing center directors aren't tenurable (Isaacs & Knight, 2014), and although no concrete numbers exist, the Writing Centers Research Project suggests that many writing centers primarily hire undergraduates as tutors, followed closely by graduate students and professional staff, all of whom are contingent ("Tutors," Writing Centers Research Survey 2018–2019). But striking as they may be, these numbers only tell part of the story.

When we began working together to study contingency,<sup>1</sup> all three of us held contingent writing center positions, and we were—and remain—concerned that the issue of contingent labor in writing center studies is more often than not an absent presence in our scholarly conversations. Moreover, when it is addressed, contingent workers themselves are often the subjects rather than the agents of the investigation. Scholarship is produced about them, not for them, and not often enough by them.

Despite its at times exclusionary tenor, the existing scholarship about writing center and writing classroom labor provides an important start to the conversation about contingency. To varying degrees, scholars in writing studies have explored the politics of the corporate university

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and contingency of the same kind that haunts writing centers (Bousquet, 2008; Kahn et al., 2017). And a close reading of the last several decades of writing center scholarship suggests that contingency has always been in the periphery of our conversations. A rereading of the early debates about the relative marginalization of writing centers and writing center workers by Gary A. Olson (1984), Jeanne H. Simpson (1985), Lisa Ede (1989), Nancy Maloney Grimm (1999), Elizabeth H. Bousquet (1999), Peter Carino and Byron Stay (2002), Muriel Harris (2002), Neal Lerner (2006), and others reminds us that this marginalization never existed in a vacuum. Rather, it was the direct result of the contingency under which writing center workers have historically labored.

More recently, writing center scholarship has taken on contingency more directly. Two articles by Dawn Fels et al. (2016, 2021) (both of which are co-authored by the three editors of this special issue) highlighted the benefits and risks of contingency through extensive interview research with contingent workers in writing centers. “Toward an Investigation into the Working Conditions of Non-Tenure Line, Contingent Writing Center Workers,” one of the relatively few articles on contingency in writing centers published in *Forum* in recent decades,<sup>2</sup> explored the reasons for and approaches to conducting interview research with contingent writing center workers. And “Contingent Writing Center Work: Benefits, Risks, and the Need for Equity and Institutional Change” reported on the results of that research, amplifying contingent voices more extensively than previous writing center scholarship had. Other scholars in writing center studies engaged in similar explorations—some more explicit than others. For instance, Anne Ellen Geller and Harry Denny (2013) considered how writing center professionals have navigated their careers, concluding that they find satisfaction on different tracks and their situations are “inherently local and contingent to the moment and the individual” (pp. 123–124). And Nicole I. Caswell et al. (2016) investigated the experiences of new writing center directors in different kinds of institutional contexts. In addition, less overt discussions of contingency exist, among them that of Jackie Grutsch McKinney (2013), who investigated marginality and the iconoclasm of writing centers, and Molly Tetreault (2018), who focused on the divide between writing center administration and faculty and the marginalization of writing center administrators that results from that divide.

In this special issue, we extend on the work of scholars in writing studies in general and writing center studies in particular, arguing that contingency is a kind of class and hence an identity that intersects with race, gender, sexuality, nationality, language, ability, faith or secularism, other nonacademic classes, and other identities. And this understanding of contingency has two key implications. On one hand, it underscores that scholarship on contingency may also be scholarship on identity. On the other hand, it underscores that scholarship on identity is at times—and perhaps tacitly so—scholarship on the politics of contingency. Indeed, Harry C. Denny (2010), Travis Webster (2021), and Staci M. Perryman-Clark and Collin Lamont Craig (2019) all implicitly explore aspects of contingency through intersectional lenses. Similarly, when we read through the lens of contingency, works by scholars such as Neisha-Anne S. Green (2018) and Karen Moroski-Rigney (2022) take on new meaning. For us, contingency functions as an absent presence in these pieces. These articles imply intersections between race and contingency and neurodiversity and contingency respectively. And they reveal that professional lines or job types privilege or marginalize workers in their working lives just as other identities may.

Contributors to this special issue put a premium on expanding our scholarship on and understanding of contingent writing center workers and their labor, particularly in light of the “Great Resignation” that COVID-19 has produced and social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Me Too, which have foregrounded systemic forms of oppression. Our contributors underscore their intersectional identities in their engagement with the subject of contingency in and around writing center work. Our contributors include peer, graduate, and professional tutors, not just writing center directors, which subverts the tacit classing of writing center workers into what Neal Lerner (2000) has called the haves and have-nots of the discipline, the former being PhD-bearing directors and the latter being contingent staffers who perhaps don’t hold terminal

degrees. Likewise, many of the contributions to this issue take on different forms that intentionally blur the genre of the traditional academic essay, allowing authors to more fully explore the nuances of contingency and its effects on their lives.

Exemplifying this genre-bending is Ana Maria Guay's poignant hybrid essay, "Comfort, Contingency, and Writing Center Work: An Essay in Three Illusions." Here Guay writes from the positionality of a queer, contingent worker of color, building on past critiques of the "comfortable" writing center and from Sara Ahmed's work on public comfort to interrogate the tenuous relationship between contingency and comfort. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, Guay uses haunting narrative vignettes to illustrate the shifting meanings of comfort and its function in concealing the realities of contingent labor. Guay's evocative conclusion urges us to look past the illusions of comfort and toward a new path of collective resistance.

Patrick Greene and Travis Webster write from the lived experiences of queer writing center workers in "Queer Contingency in Writing Center Administrative Work." Through a "sprinkle of Queer Theory" and their own stories, they investigate how queer labor and contingency intersect and how they as writing center workers queer the discussion of contingency. In weaving their stories together, they find the rough edges of writing center activism and illustrate how contingency endangers the queer and radical work of writing centers. Ultimately, they suggest that contingent writing center workers approach their labor with an awareness of the reality of their material conditions, while still actively embracing the subversion and queer, radical work of writing centers.

Wonderful Faison and Tatiana Glushko similarly address their lived experiences in "Beyond the Two-Tiered System: Contingency as a Tool for Academic Upward Mobility." Here they entwine writing center scholarship with their own personal narratives, which detail their preconceptions and misconceptions about working as full-time contingent administrators in writing centers. They critique the two-tiered system that divides writing center workers and all faculty, staff, and administrators into haves and have-nots. They also suggest that contingent workers must develop relationships and approaches to documenting their labor in order to make formal proposals for better job security and pathways to promotion; both exist as possibilities for contingent workers, and both would help reveal the scholarly status of writing centers.

In "Trading Spaces: Space as Metaphor for Contingency in Writing Centers," Genie Giaimo examines contingency in relation to the spaces in which writing center professionals work, drawing from theories of space by Tim Cresswell, Henri Lefebvre, and Nedra Reynolds. From the perspective of a contingent writing center director, Giaimo uses narrative to interrogate the politics of space. Giaimo sees space as prompting emotional responses from writing center workers, and these interweave with their emotional responses to contingency. Ultimately, Giaimo argues that space takes on the precarity that comes to define and distinguish contingent writing center worker status and contingency in general; likewise, the detachment of workplace space from contingent work invites noteworthy explorations of academic community development beyond the physical bounds of the academy.

Grace Lee-Amuzie offers another important lens through which to view contingency in "Contingency as a Barrier to Decolonial Engagement: Listening to Multilingual Writers." Here Lee-Amuzie looks to the work of Romeo García and others to highlight the urgent need for tutors to engage in deliberate decolonial practices, such as transformative listening, to better support multilingual writers; this work, however, is complicated and often stymied by contingency. Drawing from varied experiences as a multilingual contingent worker, Lee-Amuzie highlights the potential institutional risks that contingent administrators face as they work to decolonize tutor training in writing centers, as well as the challenges that contingent writing center tutors face in implementing these practices. Lee-Amuzie concludes with a challenge to readers to consider what "practical and strategic steps" they might take in their own writing centers to encourage a "culture of deep listening" that supports multilingual writers while being mindful of contingent worker labor.

In “The Paradoxes of Contingency: Stories of Contingent Professional Tutors’ Lived Experiences,” Beth Sabo, Kaia-Marie A. Bishop, Kristine M. Gatchel, and Rachel Dick use autoethnography to analyze their experiences as contingent workers with intersectional identities. Exploring the ways in which contingency interacts with class, ability, and gender, they argue that paradoxes come to shape contingent workers’ realities, and they home in on three paradoxes in particular: First, they consider how professional tutors and contingent administrators are vital to their institutions but not valued by them. Second, they consider the ways in which they work on contingent lines in order to live but face impediments to their health as a result of that contingent work. Finally, they interrogate the illusion of having a choice as a contingent worker.

Glenn Hutchinson, Xuan Jiang, and Mario Avalos also focus on tutors as contingent workers in “Writing Tutor Alumni Takeaways: Pros and Cons of Contingency.” Building on and diversifying the work of the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (PWTARP), the authors conduct their own mixed methods case study of peer tutor alumni at their Hispanic-Serving Institution. Moreover, Hutchinson, Jiang, and Avalos analyze their study data with an eye to tutor labor, highlighting the impact of economic pressure and emotional labor on peer tutors. And Avalos—a former peer tutor—weaves a supplemental narrative throughout the essay to illustrate and contextualize study data, presenting a compelling argument for increased attention to peer tutors and their working conditions

“Doing More with Barely Enough: Narratives of an Undergraduate Tutor Researcher and Mentor” by Andrea Efthymiou and Santiago Zea brings our special issue to a close through addressing the relationship between a tenure-line writing center director and a contingent peer tutor who is a first-generation college student. Using autoethnography and diary studies, they explore how academic research may operate at cross-purposes with paid writing center work. Zea describes the experience of being a student worker and the amount of unpaid labor that extends into undergraduate research in writing center studies. Ultimately, Zea and Efthymiou question whether such labor is fair to the student and provide revised approaches for how writing center administrators can more ethically treat student workers.

We wish to thank all of our contributors for their labor: for writing about their experiences of contingency and for writing about how we—in the best tradition of writing center work—can learn from each other to make effective change as a field. As you read this special issue, we invite you to reflect on how contingency has affected our field and, most importantly, on what we can do in solidarity with one another to bring about labor justice and progressive change in our discipline. We need to come together to take disciplinary collective action to solve the problems of contingency—problems that no one outside of writing centers can or will solve.

## Notes

1. For the purposes of this special issue of *Writing Center Journal*, we are defining contingent employment status as any class of employment with limited job security.

2. Other articles on contingency in writing centers that have appeared in *Forum* include, for instance, Elizabeth Busekrus’s (2014) “Contingency as a Writing Lab Coordinator: Defining Spatiality” and Lacey Wootton’s (2020) “The Affordances of Governance Structures for the Non-Tenure-Track Parrhesiastes.”

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