

## CHAPTER 8

# THE RISKS OF CONTINGENT WRITING CENTER DIRECTORSHIPS

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Threads: Local Changes to Workload, Pay, and Working Conditions;  
Protecting Gains, Telling Cautionary Tales

## INTRODUCTION

Writing centers' role in contingent labor concerns dates back to 1909. Lerner's research traces the first mention of "rhetorical laboratory" to 1894, when the benefits of laboratory methods of teaching were first recognized in early composition classrooms. Those methods, characterized by the one-to-one writing conference, grew in popularity as student populations grew in number and diversity. And with that growth came a labor crisis. In 1909, according to Lerner, the Modern Language Association (MLA) and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) commissioned Hopkins to "detail and quantify the burden under which high school and college English teachers suffered" (26). Apparently, they suffered a lot. Lerner shares Hopkins' findings:

The result was that "instructors wear out, suffer from indigestion and nervous exhaustion, lose their efficiency, impair their eyesight, become the prey of shattered nerves, break down and find their way to the hospital or cemetery because of 'killing' work in English Composition." (27)

Hopkins reported similar results a decade later. The English professoriate certainly wasn't going to be very effective if its membership was greatly reduced by exhaustion or worse.

Enter contingent faculty to save (literally) the professoriate from having to teach a) too many students, and b) too many unprepared students. These contingent faculty taught basic and remedial composition courses or ran writing clinics. They

became tools to relieve the “real” classroom teachers of their underprepared students—those students whose first language was not English, whose family income placed them lower—much lower—on the socio-economic ladder than students who belonged in college and were worthy of professors’ attention. The contingent faculty and clinic approach were to cure students who arrived ill-prepared for college, to get those students out of the classroom and out of the way, or, as Lerner describes, “out of sight and out of mind” (32). The writing center field has fought against this remedial reputation ever since, not only because of the subtractive light it casts upon diverse students’ abilities but also because it devalues the work of writing center workers and the role they play in students’ academic success.

Though some writing center directors who’ve been around long enough will argue that the writing center field’s fight for institutional credibility has improved throughout its history, there is new evidence to cause concern. Today, 71 percent of writing center directors hold non-tenure-track positions (Isaacs and Knight 48). When other things are equal, these directors enjoy relative job security, collegiality, adequate resources, administrative support, and autonomy. In the midst of a depressed economy and cuts to federal and state funding for higher education, though, anything can happen. I wanted to write this chapter to alert readers to the risks of contingency. I especially hope to reach those who have yet to identify with the contingent crowd and those who claim to be labor activists but “abuse the contingency of their contingent faculty to solve other problems” (Kahn). My aim is to offer a set of realities to those who say that things aren’t so bad. Well, things are never that bad until they are.

This chapter offers readers a glimpse into the interconnected risks of contingent writing center directorships: the programmatic, the professional, and the personal. Writing center directors’ contingency affects the programs they develop and administer, the decisions they can make, the institutional support they receive, their membership in local and national communities of practice, and the academic freedom and autonomy they need to direct their program as they professionally see fit. Contingency affects writing center directors’ access to professional development opportunities: sabbaticals, conference travel and attendance, research and scholarship, leadership positions both on- and off-campus. Contingency also threatens directors’ financial security and, consequently, theirs and their family’s health and well-being. My hope is that, once aware of these risks, readers will work with others to create more sustainable, equitable writing center positions and programs.

## **WHAT IS A CONTINGENT WRITING CENTER DIRECTOR?**

When I proposed this chapter, I planned to describe the risks of contingent, non-tenure-track (NTT) writing center directorships by sharing contingent

directors' stories about the programmatic, professional, and personal risks associated with the precarity of their positions. I surveyed new and veteran writing center directors—tenured, tenure-line, and non-tenure line. I asked for the good, the bad, and the ugly about their positions. Then one by one, the NTT directors I hoped to spotlight either left or lost their jobs. This did not surprise me. Attrition and dismissals are by-products of contingency. Most of those who moved on did so because they found better pay, working conditions, and longer contracts. At least one, whose two-year contract was up, found herself having to reapply for her job, despite having built a thriving writing center program. Those who lost their jobs were fired for reasons that had nothing to do with their performance. Some were given notice and the chance to say goodbye to their tutors. Others were escorted off campus before they could even clean out their desks. These directors all had pristine performance evaluations. Some even had new contracts. None had union protection.

Then as the 2014 academic year got underway, posts to WCENTER, the main listserv for writing center directors, revealed a startling trend. Tenured and tenure-line (TT) writing center directors described events that led to the loss of their centers. One described feeling forced to resign as director of a thriving, model center that she created two decades ago. That announcement elicited responses from other directors, NTT and TT alike, who shared similar “traumatic,” “devastating,” and “shocking” experiences. Among those who lost their centers were icons in the writing center and composition fields. As the discussion ensued, questions arose about the value of longevity and continuity in program development, contracts, academic freedom, performance evaluation, advancement. Also raised were questions about the effects on teaching and learning and students' and tutors' rights to success. As was the case for the TT and NTT directors who lost their positions, once they resigned, someone higher up the food chain with absolutely no knowledge of the theoretical, pedagogical, and administrative trends germane to writing centers appointed an ill-qualified person to take over, leading to additional questions about the value of qualified writing center directors.

But then a different kind of question emerged. Questions like: What did I do to let this happen? What should I have done differently? How did I not notice what was happening? What should I have done earlier to prevent this? With whom should I have connected who might have become an ally? Why did I trust the decision-makers? How can I now come to a better understanding of what motivated the decision-makers to do what they did? Troubling and telling questions, those. Troubling because they place the director in the position of blaming themselves for what happened to them.

One of the greatest risks of contingency is the failure of writing center directors

and their colleagues to see how vulnerable they are. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) describes contingent faculty as those who work off the tenure-line in full or part-time positions and, as such, “serve in insecure, unsupported positions with little job security and few protections for academic freedom” (AAUP para. 1). It is worth repeating that 71 percent of writing center directors hold contingent positions (Isaacs and Knight 48). That means that over two-thirds of current directors, like other contingent faculty, are at far greater risk for losing their jobs or a portion of their jobs than tenure line directors. While that statistic should alarm us, Isaacs and Knight’s research points to others that should, as well. Rather than rely on self-reported information from writing center directors, Isaacs and Knight chose their study participants. They then used writing centers’ websites and other documents to evaluate how “writing centers represent themselves to their stakeholders” (43). They compared writing center director positions to those held by other writing program administrators (WPA). Their findings are relevant to my discussion for two reasons. First, writing centers are writing programs, and on some campuses, directors direct not only the writing center but other writing programs, such as WAC and FYC, programs often headed by a TT faculty member. Second, in their sample of 101 schools, Isaacs and Knight found that 92 offered first-year writing programs, 79 percent of which were run by a WPA. Interestingly, of those WPAs, only 47 percent held tenure-track positions. Only 47 percent.

Isaacs and Knight also looked for trends related to the gender of the writing center director and makeup of the writing center staff. Of the writing center directors whose gender Isaacs and Knight could identify from center websites, 73 percent were female, a finding they point to as “remarkably similar to Healy’s 1995 finding that 74 percent of the writing center leaders were female” (49). With regard to writing centers’ tutoring staff, Isaacs and Knight found that 81 percent of centers were staffed by undergraduate and graduate students. “Thus,” they wrote, “we saw students as major forces in writing center work at the four-year university, a trend readers might applaud as a sign of a capable student body or deplore as a sign of the low professional status of writing tutors” (49). Isaacs and Knight’s study begins to describe the perfect conditions for the exploitation of NTT writing center directors: a field that has historically relied on self-reported information that falls short of describing reality; a field in which other writing program directors’ tenure status falls short of a majority; a field dominated by women; a field staffed by students.

## CONTINGENCY AND EFFICIENCY

Recessionary rebounds and administrators’ calls to do more with less have led to

trends that affect the job security of writing center directors. One is the move to turn once tenurable writing center director positions into contingent positions. At one institution, the director's position was split into two contingent positions upon the director's retirement; one portion of the job went to a part-time adjunct. In two other cases, tenured writing center directors lost their centers when oversight for them was moved to administrators with no composition or writing center experience. In yet another case, a contingent director was fired and replaced by someone else within the department who had no experience, publications, or research in the writing center field but who had already been on the university's payroll. In the past, these moves might have been blamed on administrators' misunderstanding of what writing center directors do and why it's necessary to have someone at the helm with expertise in composition pedagogy and writing center praxis: a "real" writing center director. But misunderstanding was not the reason for these changes. Nor, frankly, was the contingent status of the director, made evident by the tenured directors' experiences. In all of these cases, economic efficiency was the motivating factor—the need to save on salaries. When economic efficiencies must be gained, it is easier to cut a contingent director and either not replace them or replace them with another employee who is already on the payroll. Tenured directors are harder to fire. In fact, in the cases where tenured directors lost their centers, they still retained a portion of their jobs, but direction of their centers fell to less expensive, less experienced contingent labor.

### **THE BENEFITS OF TT STATUS AND THE HARMS OF CONTINGENCY**

The topic of whether a writing center director's position should be TT or NTT comes up every so often on WCENTER. The overwhelming number of respondents to a recent query noted the benefits to directors who hold a TT position. James Mischler referred to the issue of program "permanence," noting how "a director with a full-time faculty budget line seems to provide more stability to the writing center program than an admin. [sic] staff member line that can be eliminated at the first sign of budget trouble" ("tenure track"). In the same discussion, Neal Lerner described how his tenured status afforded him opportunities to advance and serve in ways that NTT directors don't always get to: ". . . on graduate studies committee, undergraduate studies committee, tenure-review committee within the department . . . , and Faculty Senate, all positions that ask for a fairly broad institutional view. . . ." Nick Carbone, a former writing center director, acknowledged how directors "fulfill the three obligations expected of most faculty: research, teaching, and service." He went on to note that writing center directors

strengthen the college's commitment to its students and faculty, helping to improve retention and student success, in palpable and measurable ways. [They] sit on key university committees—QEP, assessment, placement—where their expertise in writing and teaching of writing, student outreach and tutoring, tutor and faculty professional development, make them essential to their institutions' missions. . . . Because they are central to an institution's life and mission, [writing center directors] foster the intellectual development of students and colleagues, and deserve the recognition, support, responsibilities, and privileges that come with being tenure-track faculty members. ("tenure track")

While there are those who argue that contingency isn't as bad as some people make it out to be, Mischler, Lerner, and Carbone all point to reasons why writing center director positions should be tenurable. Mischler raises an important point about what contingency says about program permanence. And while some institutions may invite or expect NTT directors to engage in the work that Lerner and Carbone describe, not all reward or compensate them for it. In fact, contracts and performance evaluations may actually state that engaging in these activities will not affect future decisions about employment, compensation, or promotion.

## PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND CONTINGENCY

Why do NTT directors work as hard as they do, then, if contingency poses so many risks? Professional identity motivates many to engage in activities they know will not result in added job security, salary, or recognition. Working hard is simply what writing center directors do. It's part of their ethos and service to students. It's part of who they are and want to become as professionals in the composition and writing center fields. In her article "Professional Identity in a Contingent-Labor Profession: Expertise, Autonomy, Community in Composition Teaching," Penrose describes three dimensions of professionalism:

Researchers in sociology, education, history, rhetoric, sociolinguistics, and other fields have posited a number of interacting factors constituting membership in a profession. Synthesizing across a range of studies . . . three primary dimensions emerge: . . . 1) a specialized and dynamic knowledge base or body of expertise, 2) a distinctive array of rights and privileges accorded to members, and 3) an internal social structure based on shared goals and values. (112)

Penrose notes that ongoing professional development is one mark of a “true professional.” She further acknowledges how a “community’s distinctive language or terminology represents a lens through which members ‘view reality in a professionally relevant way,’” which then “influences what members do or do not notice or attend to in the world around them” (113). Contingent writing center directors work as hard as they do because they believe they are a part of the We of the field, their institution, and their department. And they often are. Those connections empower them to do work they know matters. They know it matters because they’re told it does—directly by colleagues in the field, by their supervisors, or by others in their department. They know it matters because students tell them it does, and because students say it does when they complete exit surveys. Feedback can empower. It can lead contingent directors to work even harder, especially when the feedback is good. But it can also blind them to the threats of contingency.

Losing a job deals a devastating blow to one’s professional identity. Penrose describes what happens “when there is a mismatch between faculty members’ own sense of expertise and what the profession seems to value”:

At the extremes, faculty members may question their identity as professionals and wonder if they belong, or they may question the legitimacy or coherence of the profession and choose not to belong. . . . [T]hose who have confidence in their own professional knowledge and also respect the program they’re working in . . . may find that the two are not in sync and therefore see themselves as teaching outside their profession. Under any of these scenarios the faculty member is distanced from the professional community and unlikely to see him- or herself as contributing to it, making it difficult to sustain an image of oneself as expert. (114)

Penrose’s arguments describe the sentiments of the writing center directors I know who lost their jobs for reasons that had nothing to do with their job performance. With few exceptions, those directors continue long after their dismissal to stay connected to their professional communities. They attend and present at conferences. They serve professional organizations. They mentor junior faculty and future writing center directors. They continue with their research and publications. But not having a writing center to lead makes a tremendous difference. Doing all that work doesn’t feel as significant as it once did because, without a center to lead, there are no students to serve. And students are always at the center of the work that writing center directors do.

Penrose’s discussion of professionalism is especially helpful in understanding

the risks of contingent writing center directorships. The two-tiered system of academia creates the internal structure of a department or institution that prevents NTT directors' access to the same rights and privileges enjoyed by their TT colleagues. That system influences the internal structure of a department or institution that then prevents development of shared goals and values. This creates an inequitable environment where, under the most dire circumstances (say, budget cuts), someone or something has to lose. Penrose argues that "as academic professions seek to protect their autonomy in the face of shrinking university budgets, increasing public oversight, corporate sponsorship and other influences, the mechanisms of professionalization *within* the field of composition may be interpreted as an attempt by some members to restrict the autonomy of other members" (116).

These restrictions carry over into the rules of interaction that govern groups of colleagues and lay the foundation for a two-tiered system within a department or writing program, a system that affects contingent writing center directors. In fact, on some campuses, the writing center program is not considered a writing program in the way that FYC, WAC/WID, or ESL programs are. And within the composition and writing center fields, little attention has been paid until recently to the risks of contingent directorships, though plenty of work has been done on some campuses to make director's positions more secure (see Brady and Singh-Corcoran). What we do have are anecdotes offered by contingent writing center directors, often after they lose their jobs. Those anecdotes relate to inequities in shared governance, professionalism, collegiality, and continuity. They relate to inequities made apparent by who works year-round; who can teach what; who gets paid for teaching additional courses; whose conference travel is funded; and who has support to propose new programs. They extend to whose books are included in the department display; who gets invited to events, even the informal happy hour or holiday party; whose research matters; whose presence matters at department meetings, candidate receptions, and campus events. They even include who gets introduced to the dean or the provost or the president—at the interview stage, after being hired, or ever. As Penrose concludes, "How one views oneself is powerfully influenced by local circumstance, including the physical setting and institutional context and the structural relations these symbolize" (119). If we want to change the risks that contingent writing center directors face, we need to change the structural and systemic conditions that create the inequitable and exploitative conditions under which many say they work.

## PERSONAL RISKS OF CONTINGENCY

Losing a job is traumatic. In a depressed job market, especially when relocation isn't an option, a dismissal could mark the end of a writing center director's ca-



reer. Losing a job places directors and their dependents in danger of losing their homes, their health insurance, their cash savings, their retirement. Losing a job causes further risks. Belle and Bullock co-authored a policy statement on “The Psychological Consequences of Unemployment” for The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), a division of the American Psychological Association (APA). In the statement, they cite several studies that point to the psychological effects of unemployment.

Job loss is associated with elevated rates of mental and physical health problems, increases in mortality rates, and detrimental changes in family relationships and in the psychological well-being of spouses and children. Compared to stably employed workers, those who have lost their jobs have significantly poorer mental health, lower life satisfaction, less marital or family satisfaction, and poorer subjective physical health (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). A meta-analysis by Paul and Moser (2009) reinforces these findings - unemployment was associated with depression, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, low subjective well-being, and poor self-esteem. (para. 5)

The authors go on to note that these effects are especially hard on unemployed single mothers, African-Americans, Latinos/Latinas, and those with few family resources.

Losing a job also means days of completing applications for resources that barely keep an individual and their dependent family members' heads above the rising waters of poverty. The process of applying for those resources is time-consuming, long, frustrating, and adds to the trauma of job loss. And then, despite qualifying for aid, one might find that there isn't any available. In 2014, state and federal lawmakers made drastic cuts to programs on which the unemployed rely. One was the federal government's Emergency Unemployment Compensation (EUC). According to the U.S. Department of Labor's website, EUC, federally-funded extension of benefits to those whose state benefits expired, ended on January 1, 2014. Though news outlets reported the Senate's vote to extend those emergency benefits, the Labor Department's website currently indicates that extensions are still unavailable. Medicaid was also affected by federal and state lawmakers' decisions. In 2013, the Obama administration recommended that Medicaid “be opened up to anyone who earns up to 133 percent of the federal poverty level, which [was] \$15,282 for a single person” (Young para. 3). However, states could decide whether to adopt this expansion, and not all have. Drastic cuts also greatly reduced the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Pro-

gram (SNAP), a/k/a food stamps. Dean and Rosenbaum of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities described how a projected \$5 billion cut to the program in 2014 would affect over 47 million individuals and their families, including 22 million children, who already received SNAP benefits (4).

Those of us in academia don't think about how these cuts might affect us until they do. Right now, 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. Stellar evaluations will not matter. Award-winning publications or research will not matter. Letters of support from students or leaders from the composition and writing center fields will not matter. Distinguished achievements on or off-campus will not matter. Service will not matter. Improvements made to writing center services will not matter. Contributions to student achievement and retention will not matter. Contracts will not matter. Nothing will matter but what administration decides. That, too, is the nature of precarity.

## CONCLUSION

We should all be alarmed by the contingency of an entire field, but we don't seem to be. Instead, we hum along until a writing center director posts to WPA or WCENTER or Facebook the devastating news that they've lost their job or been forced to resign, or their position has been eliminated, or their contract expired, or their center moved under the supervision of someone less qualified, if at all, to run it. We rarely see posts by those who have simply been fired without warning, escorted off campus, only to come back weeks later, under the cover of darkness and when no one else is around, to retrieve their personal belongings from their offices. But they exist, too. And we never hear from tutors who are, perhaps, the lowest paid and most exploited worker in the composition and writing center fields today.

Despite all of the information available about writing centers' importance to student success, directors remain vulnerable to conditions that have nothing to do with their job performance. And that affects writing center labor. When administrators see writing center directors as little more than administrative assistants, recessionary pressures place directors and their tutors at further risk. At risk for losing their jobs in an already depressed job market. At risk for working well beyond contractual expectations. At risk for relying on a contract that, ultimately, will not protect them. At risk for wage theft. At risk for exploitation. At risk for having their professional expertise and academic freedoms devalued. At risk for disenfranchisement. At risk for personal hardship.

Having been an IWCA member since 2001, and having served on its Executive Board and various committees for a number of years, I am familiar with the expertise, energy, and commitment that writing center directors display in a variety of fields charged with the task of educating students, fields that include rhetoric and composition, linguistics, TESOL, K-12 education, educational policy, and assessment. Look to any of those related fields, and you'll find someone who either got their start or made their career in a writing center. Look at the list of books, articles, and chapters published by writing center directors, and you'll see work—award-winning work—on a range of topics. These books don't just sit on the shelves of writing centers for directors and tutors to peruse during downtime. They are used in tutor training, and more and more often, they're being used outside centers in undergraduate and graduate classes taught by writing center directors or other faculty. They're used by students outside of writing centers for their own research projects. Or they're adopted by schools and community groups who want to create community-based literacy programs. In particular, what we know about student writers, writing pedagogy, and writing assessment would be greatly reduced without the research that comes out of the writing center field.

Perspective changes with hardship—or by becoming aware of others' hardships. Right now, too many fail to see the risks associated with contingent writing center directorships—even their own. This is especially true of those who work in programs that have yet to examine the risks and build structural protections for contingent writing center directors. In 2013, Brady and Singh-Corcoran described their work at West Virginia University to create a non-tenure line writing center director position that was “stable, central, well-integrated, and secure” (73). More institutions should follow their lead. Our professional organizations can also do more to enact the protection each calls for in their statements on the working conditions of contingent faculty, or to create a statement if one doesn't exist. Currently, research is underway in the writing center field to raise awareness of the risks of contingency to both directors and tutors, another contingent workforce, whom Isaacs and Knight identified as staffing 81 percent of the centers they studied (49). Those with any influence at all over the hiring of writing center directors should use the model Brady and Singh-Corcoran describe to develop contracts. Those applying for contingent writing center directorships should carefully review their contracts before accepting any offer. Among the details to look for are explicit expectations for attendance, performance, evaluation, promotion, course releases, service, research, publication, and professional development. Report lines also need to be clear, as well as what will happen to the writing center director's position if new administrators are hired. Those who apply for contingent directorships should also reach out to mentors in the

writing center field to get a sense of how the contractual expectations match the work they'll do and to get advice on negotiable points.

Unlike other writing programs, writing centers serve all students. They serve faculty and staff, too. Many writing center directors and their tutors also serve area K-12 students and teachers. Writing center directors conduct award-winning and otherwise significant research that benefits literacy educators and their students around the world. They advise and otherwise support undergraduate and graduate students' research. Their relationships with other professors' students keep those students in college and move them toward degree completion. Writing center directors serve in leadership positions in regional and national organizations, including but not limited to NCTE, CCCC, TYCA, IWCA, and the CWPA. And if those acts of engagement are not enough, we have research, scholarship, and national surveys that show the benefit of writing center visits to every student population one can imagine. The composition and writing center fields have a responsibility to the 71 percent. When we lose valued directors, we all lose.

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