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Col(labor)ation: Academic Freedom, Working Conditions, and the Teaching of College English

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As journals, *Forum: Issues about Part-Time and Contingent Faculty* and *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* have coexisted annually for decades—quite literally: *Forum* has appeared in the pages of *TETYC* each spring as a part of the March issue for nearly twenty years. As editors of the respective journals, we saw an exciting opportunity to build together an issue with a shared focus. *TETYC*’s call for proposals for this special issue of the journal, which focuses on academic freedom and labor in the two-year college, is especially well aligned with the editorial mission of *Forum*, whose stated focus is “working conditions, professional life, activism, and perspectives of non-tenure-track faculty in college composition and communication.” Over the last year, the two of us (Amy Lynch-Biniek and Holly Hassel) have been collaborating to bring you this joint issue with a collection of thoughtful, engaging, and useful pieces addressing the interconnected concerns of academic freedom, tenure and contingency, two-year college mission and goals, and how these intermingle to create our working conditions (and teaching and learning conditions). What the articles in this issue offer, then, are a developing scholarly foundation for the continued work of the engaged teacher-scholar-activist (as called for by Pat Sullivan) around writing program development, equitable teaching and learning conditions, and the role of shared governance in ensuring high-quality and just environments for all students and teachers in college English classrooms.

Ultimately, we see some critical common ground, reflected in the pieces you’ll find in this issue. The partnership of our two journals is a good fit at least in part because of the overlap between contingency and two-year colleges. With 30,000 two-year college English faculty in the United States—70 percent of whom are contingent or adjunct—the most common experience of teaching college English may very well be that of an instructor working off the tenure track in a technical, community, or junior college (Calhoon-Dillahunt et al. 8). In this collaborative issue, we hope to put that experience front and center in the scholarly conversation surrounding academic freedom. The two of us see several key themes emerging from that conversation: identity, advocacy, agency, and materiality. In this introductory framing, we describe how these themes are woven throughout the essays in this issue.

First and foremost, we see the authors in these pages grappling with questions of identity—reflective of discussions belonging to the larger field of writing studies. That is, as Annie Del Principe and Jacqueline Brady query in their contribution...
to this issue’s Symposium, “how is knowledge made in composition? And how do we think it should be made?” They ultimately assert, “how we define writing program along with the terms professional and expertise has enormous implications for academic freedom” (353–354). These same concerns are explored in depth in Jeff Klausman’s contribution to this issue, “The Two-Year College Writing Program and Academic Freedom: Labor, Scholarship, and Compassion,” reporting on how and whether conventional definitions of academic freedom provide us ways to consider “why some writing teachers choose not to participate in program-related work or, more troubling, choose to resist such work” (386). Likewise, Alexis Teagarden’s piece, “Academic Freedom, Contingency, and the Place of Professional Learning Communities,” similarly invites readers to consider the relationship between the identity and expertise of a writing teacher and his or her standing within the discipline—as well as how continued professional learning can either foster or inhibit a sense of identity and agency for instructors. From another angle, Katie McWain’s study of dual enrollment instructors—high school teachers credentialed to teach college writing in a high school setting—similarly invites reflection on how and whether such educators are part of a profession and a discipline.

Moreover, the pieces in this issue offer distinct treatments of advocacy and academic freedom—that is, how two-year college faculty and writing teachers across professional ranks and sectors of higher education are able to advocate for students, implement and assess new initiatives, and have status within their structure to direct reform efforts in their local spaces. The contributions in this issue from Howard Tinberg, Darin Jensen, Katie McWain, Anthony Warnke and Kirsten Higgins, as well as Klausman, address—in some form—the limitations or possibilities of exerting influence over one’s immediate environment, whether that be shaping a writing program curriculum; resisting a national reform effort to eliminate developmental education; or advocating for multiple measures placement process or integrated reading and writing curriculum. For the teachers in McWain’s piece, it might be as specific as navigating disparate sets of curricular and program standards in what she identifies as the “liminal space” they occupy. Warnke and Higgins, as well as Sullivan and Tinberg, identify strategies for instructors, program directors, administrators, and others to effect change and have influence over the institutional decisions that create or transform the working conditions of literacy educators.

A third theme the contributions to this issue develop is agency: to move from principle to practice, academic freedom must be grounded in the agency of instructors of any rank. Jensen notes in the Symposium that each of several forms of “academic freedom requires a stable and secure position to be enacted fully. Each requires a place in which praxis and a professional identity can be grounded,” whatever a professor’s contract status, campus conditions, or professional expertise. If the professor doesn’t feel secure enough to act on it, academic freedom is hollow. This truth is asserted by many of the contributors to this special issue. Plumbing the experiences of dual enrollment teachers, for example, McWain observes that they “inhabit a complicated institutional positionality” that “requires them to deliver college-level classes without benefiting from the academic freedoms typically
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extended to college instructors.” Unless granted the agency to assert expertise in the context of their college teaching, these instructors may miss the opportunity to realize the potential of their positions. Hence McWain calls for the support and “development of high school instructors who are invested in the academic freedoms and political possibilities of college writing” (407). Agency must be nurtured and encouraged—and sometimes asserted and defended—by those with greater status and agency in the educational ecosystem.

Unquestionably, contingency complicates agency as it does every element of teaching. Even on campuses where contingent faculty have more protections and stability, they may encounter policies that undermine their ability to act. Guidelines that tenure-line faculty may not give a second thought can have a paralyzing effect on adjunct faculty and stifle their professional judgment. For instance, in “Plagiarism and Contingency: A Problem of Academic Freedom,” Sandra M. Leonard points out that campus plagiarism policies, often imperfect or even out of touch with composition scholarship, can sometimes be bent or ignored by tenure-line instructors working with inexperienced writers. Many of us have chosen to discuss poor paraphrasing or missing citations with students and offer an opportunity to revise and resubmit, recognizing the difference between malicious cheating and a fledgling understanding of academic fair use. An adjunct instructor, however, is “not often at liberty to make such distinctions.” Instead, “this group of more vulnerable instructors is not as likely to assert themselves in opposition to official institutional policy. Contingent faculty... experience a unique pressure to follow what is often unambiguous institutional policy” (A4).

Likewise, Bob Samuels observes how institutional infrastructures that are taken for granted as “business as usual”—student evaluations—are experienced differently depending on the status and working conditions of instructors. Samuels’s piece explores the ways in which student evaluations temper pedagogical agency, most especially among contingent faculty reliant upon “high student evaluations to keep their jobs or earn pay increases.” He notes, “The emphasis on pleasing students not only can result in grade inflation and defensive teaching, but it also places the teacher in an impossible situation when dealing with political issues in a polarized environment” (A22). We teach in an age when a classroom discussion, social media post, or difficult assignment may lead to students challenging a professor’s practice. While being accountable to our students and being professionally evaluated are both valuable, even necessary, some current manifestations of student evaluations may tie us down rather than keep us on our toes.

Lastly, we see materiality as central to many of the articles in this issue, as authors call upon us to reflect on history and chart the course for a future, asking, “how did we get here, needing to reassert our once sacrosanct academic freedom?” One answer is the neoliberal transformation of higher education. Sometimes, our pedagogical, intellectual, and scholarly growth can be almost as uneven and awkward as that of incoming first-year students—we need time to reflect and learn, space to make mistakes, and the freedom to assert our views. Protecting our professional development can pay dividends in the forms of innovative research and teaching.
but that freedom does not often fit well into the model of neoliberal educational reform. Warnke and Higgins assert, “Frequently framed in terms of neoliberal efficiency, these calls for reform have had far-reaching impact on many aspects of the two-year college (TYC) ecology, from funding models to placement” (363). Cost effectiveness too often trumps instructors’ professional judgment, and austerity may triumph over programmatic innovation. English departments and first-year composition may be especially affected by the market model of higher ed, wherein the former is too often characterized as an unnecessary luxury item and the latter as a cash cow to be exploited. “Expensive” tenure-line English professors are asked to accomplish more with less funding each year, while contingent faculty multiply, treated as a cheaper and disposable means of staffing the more lucrative courses, thus maximizing profit.

Recently, Nancy Welch and Tony Scott’s collection Composition in the Age of Austerity has addressed this issue. In “First Year Writing and the Angels of Austerity,” Welch explains that “Neoliberalism seeks to resolve the persistent crisis in capital accumulation not only by expanding the reach of the market but also by shedding financial responsibility for all areas of life, including in education, that cannot be easily packaged and sold” (134). Management urges us to see programs in terms of return on investment, and so decisions regarding required coursework, course delivery, and textbooks often reflect that pressure. The two-year college may experience the commoditization of courses more acutely. In his Symposium piece Tinberg notes that “public colleges face a starkly different reality, especially community colleges, which have been historically underfunded and are accountable to state legislators, governors, boards of higher education, and various other external constituencies and have been exceptionally vulnerable to fluctuations in the economy. The bottom line, as it were, is that public community colleges are expected to react to these external pressures by promising to turn on a dime—to be flexible enough to adapt to even whiplash-level changes in the market environment” (343). Our training, professional judgment, and experience compete with the institution’s and the public’s demands for faster, cheaper, and bankable education. Patrick Sullivan’s contribution to this issue’s Symposium explores this concern as it relates to the two-year college mission and the experience of writing teachers.

It’s true that students’ time to graduation and their educational costs need to be addressed; both are much more than they should reasonably be. But market sensibilities don’t necessarily support the investments of time and labor that are needed to address the problems thoroughly, with our students’ and our faculty’s material needs as much in mind as academic integrity and long-term stability. Budget cuts and austerity measures are the “solution” of choice, coupled with giving more work and responsibilities to faculty, both tenure-line and contingent. The end result is that our ability to develop—our curriculums, our faculty, our scholarship—diminishes. As Klausman notes, “The material realities of two-year college English departments militate against professionalism, and thus any legitimate use of academic freedom for most faculty and especially for adjunct faculty” (394). We
are becoming, as Welch describes it, “angels in austerity’s architecture, shepherding programs without monetary support and formal workload recognition” (137).

The picture painted by the contributors to this special joint issue of TETYC and Forum is not without promise. Some offer suggestions for reform, advocacy, and actions we can take to reassert and protect our faculty and our academic freedom. Stephen Ruffus and Christie Toth call for “authentic partnerships—ones that depend upon mutual respect, appreciation of shared knowledge, and, most importantly, reciprocity.” Sullivan provides suggestions for ways in which we might become “teacher-scholar-activists.” And Warnke and Higgins’s piece offers a heuristic within each of their key ideas, offering a range of strategies for engaging faculty and administrators in the kinds of reform efforts that we are likely to encounter as literacy professionals in higher education. Finding the strategy that will work in our contexts is key, and Anna K. Nardo and Barbara Heifferon remind us that “despair is not a strategy” (27). Hope requires a plan. At some point, it is important that we move from reading and writing to planning and acting. We hope that the discussions in these pages will aid in doing just that.

Works Cited


