

# Inviting the "Outsiders" In: Local Efforts to Improve Adjunct Working Conditions

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*ABSTRACT: An adjunct turned writing program administrator reflects on her professional journey and describes efforts to improve the teaching environment amongst composition faculty—primarily part-time—within her department. Based on a local program review, a pilot faculty relations plan was implemented that addressed two major areas: offering more professional development opportunities and creating improved communication across the composition faculty. Interviews and surveys conducted with the faculty emerged affective themes that demonstrated adjunct faculty indeed felt more valued in their roles during and after the plan's implementation, while some remained uncertain about their job stability and place within the university. The author concludes that by attending to the professional needs of adjuncts and heightening awareness around the challenge of contingency labor in teaching, universities and departments can tap into the deep reservoirs of knowledge and experience adjuncts bring to their teaching and build positive futures for basic writing professionals while working for institutional change.*

*KEYWORDS: basic writing; contingent faculty; teaching; professional development*

When I was hired to teach several sections of basic writing to supplement my part-time professional writing job, I eagerly took the opportunity to hone my skills as a teacher. Despite having worked as a teaching assistant during graduate school, I was unaware of the variety of issues facing professionals in contingent labor positions in academia. Over time, I learned through experience and discussions with others just how complicated these positions could be. While I was grateful to be in a department that valued and supported part-time faculty in many ways, it was still a position on the fringes. Over the course of five years as an adjunct, I was an insider in the world of contingent faculty, which often seemed to be on the outside of the rest of the university.

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While I initially did not understand the crucial role contingent faculty play in composition programs at most universities, I quickly noted the obvious: in an ideal situation, universities would have a comprehensive team of full-time faculty teaching within writing programs. Through my research, I unearthed the rationale for why this does not happen. Most often, financial limitations, whether real or perceived, are offered as the reason for the heavy reliance on adjunct faculty. Indeed, now more than ever, the importance of adjuncts is not limited to English Departments; part-time faculty play an important role in college teaching across the curriculum. To me, this makes it even more crucial that we carefully examine our own programs to better understand how our environment influences the quality of life for faculty, and the quality of education for students.

Therefore, when I became a writing program administrator (WPA), I wanted to focus on ways we could improve the working conditions and offer more fulfilling teaching experiences within the writing program. To do this, I started by observing and noting what was currently happening within our department. I then surveyed adjuncts about their experiences and what they would like to see improved. Following initial responses and observations, I implemented a pilot plan to improve relations with the Composition faculty at my university. At the conclusion of the pilot, I did more extensive interviewing of the adjuncts to determine if this local effort improved their experiences; these interviews about how and if the pilot influenced their satisfaction within our Composition program are the focus of this essay. Ultimately, themes emerged about how this local effort changed instructors' experiences within our department. Primarily, the faculty reported that the implementation of the plan enhanced their perceptions of their expertise being recognized within the department and they felt more engaged in a professional community of teachers. Unfortunately, it did not address the most critical issues facing the contingent faculty, including pay, stability, and promotion.

Even though my own history as an adjunct helped me understand the contingent faculty experience, it is vitally important to acknowledge that I write from a privileged place now. This privilege makes it more difficult for me to truly recognize the current issues contingent faculty address in their employment. James Sledd, who tirelessly advocated for fair and stable working conditions, notes that efforts to make change are usually hampered by those who benefit from the continued underemployment of others, "The privileged—whether compositionists, literati, or higher administrators—have resisted such change in the belief that it would deny them their

privileges” (279). While my desire is that I am not a part of this group Sledd identifies as those who protect their own privilege by suppressing progress, the fact that I am in a full-time, tenure-track position means that I cannot fully understand adjunct employment at my institution in the same way I could before.

## **CONSIDERATION OF NATIONAL CONTINGENT LABOR ISSUES**

Before zeroing in on our local composition program, I would like to contextualize contingency in composition. It is no secret that discussion of contingent labor conditions has been especially important in English studies because of its long-term reliance on adjuncts. Locally, our program is no exception to this. Therefore, English Departments should be attuned to the needs of their adjuncts and the challenges inherent in teaching part-time, including:

[C]ontingent faculty often carry heavy teaching loads and teach at multiple institutions to make a living. They are routinely subject to last minute teaching assignments. They typically have less of a professional community to interact with about the discipline and teaching of writing. They rarely have any institutional ‘place,’ either physically in terms of an office where they can work with students or figuratively in terms of a voice in departments or the institution. (Strickland 132)

As Strickland recognizes, finding an institutional place is important to most of our professional identities. Our conception of place locates us within a profession, a specialty, a department, and a university. When faculty do not have opportunities to interact with others within their discipline, or even to think more broadly about how best to teach within the varied institutions of which they are a part, then these conditions do not support long-term program consistency. On the other hand, when faculty have a stable position within an institution, they will better understand the students’ needs and have more time to devote to developing their pedagogy and working with students. The best long-term planning requires encouraging universities to better fund programs and create full-time (ideally tenure-track) positions for composition faculty. However, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, almost half of the faculty members employed in the US are part-time. While in past years it has been primarily focused in the humanities, the use of adjuncts is becoming more common in the sciences as

well. Work continues from a wide variety of places—including the National Council of Teachers of English, the Council of Writing Program Administrators, and the Modern Language Association—to study, understand, and advocate for and with contingent faculty.

The difficulties that adjunct faculty face as a group within higher education do not go unnoticed in the composition studies community. In fact, *College English* devoted an entire issue to the topic in March 2011, addressing issues such as the current status of contingent faculty, experience of contingent faculty through activity theory, and barriers to contingent faculty's full participation in English studies. The editors specifically noted that the publication of this issue came 25 years after the Wyoming Resolution, which was "one of the first and certainly among the most significant efforts to recognize the status and working conditions of contingent faculty in our discipline" (McDonald and Schell 353). After momentum was created by a group of graduate students and faculty members at the 1986 Wyoming Conference on English, the Wyoming Resolution—which outlined fair and appropriate working conditions and benefits for composition faculty to ensure quality programs—was adopted at CCCC's annual business meeting in 1987. This led to further discussions about working conditions within composition, which spurred the creation of CCCC's *Statement of Principles and Standards in the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing*. This statement covered two categories: 1) Professional Standards That Promote Quality Education and 2) Teaching Conditions Necessary for Quality Education. As these initiatives suggest, compositionists have been eager to find ways to improve conditions for all faculty for some time. In 1991, James Sledd, an important forerunner in this movement, questioned the usefulness of the efforts to improve conditions through the Wyoming Resolution; he asks, "in the five years after the once-so-promising Wyoming Resolution, why has so much talk produced so little action to check the exploitation of composition instructors? Second, what can be done, if anything, to right this wrong" (269). His critiques about conditions for adjuncts—lack of status and benefits of tenure-track faculty—remain today. So, I feel we must continue to extend potential solutions to Sledd's question—"what can be done, if anything. . . ?"

In spite of the support of professional organizations and attention to this issue in our professional literature some 25 years after the Wyoming Resolution, labor conditions have "never moved to the forefront of Composition scholarship" (Scott 4). Others agree that even with attention by prominent compositionists<sup>1</sup>, "little progress has been made toward ensur-

### Local Efforts to Improve Adjunct Working Conditions

ing that the majority of positions in academia—and, more specifically in English studies—are consistent with the spirit of the Wyoming Resolution” (McDonald and Schell 353). The working group that created NCTE’s Position Statement on the Status and Working Conditions of Contingent Faculty in 2010 explains, “we believe it is necessary to fully involve faculty members who do not have tenure-line appointments in the programs that employ them” (Palmquist, Doe, McDonald, Newman, Samuels, Schell 357). Since part-time faculty often comprise a large percentage of those teaching composition, their needs should be at the forefront of any efforts to improve teaching conditions. Using the CCCC position statement could be one way for programs to set short and long-term goals for their programs and the faculty in those programs. For me, the statement provided a way to open the conversation about best practices in composition programming.

While much work has already been done to state the need for reform for adjunct faculty and how to achieve it, there remains a need to discuss the unique local situations facing universities and the faculty who work there. In response to the development of guidelines for working conditions that were being developed in composition studies during the early 1990s, Elizabeth Rankin encouraged scholars to begin “using local action research to create a context for change.” She advocates that compositionists study their own institutional environments to learn more about the programs we teach in and ways to improve them. She explains, “we not only get to know our local academic communities, but we also create within those communities a context for positive change” (70). This challenge truly resonated with me as I considered the writing program at our university. Further, I am encouraged when reading about recent WPA efforts, such as that of Jeffrey Klausman, whose work demonstrates the value of researching adjunct conditions. He notes that while advocating for equitable labor systems for adjunct faculty is an important long-term effort, in the short-term “something more we can do is make explicit this kind of research, which sheds light on how the realities of adjunct faculty working conditions impact efforts at building a writing program” (369). I understood that my efforts would not dramatically change the adjunct working conditions at my university; however, to create the best localized program possible, I knew it was essential to better understand our program, as well as the needs and experiences of the people working in it.

Jessica Schreyer

**THE LOCAL CONTEXT FOR COMPOSITION ADJUNCTS: TEACHING WRITING AT RIVERSIDE UNIVERSITY, 2009-2012**

Riverside University hosts approximately 1,600 students and resides on a beautiful campus in the heart of the Mississippi River Valley. The university sits in the center of a generally non-diverse (primarily Caucasian and Catholic) community, yet boasts an extremely diverse student body. After a trying time in the 1990s, the university emerged from financial crisis into a thriving college dedicated to the education of historically underserved populations, including first-generation, minority, low-income, and underprepared students. At the same time, the University administration focused its attention on developing a small but strong core of majors in two tracks: liberal arts (including English, communication, natural sciences, and philosophy), and pre-professional programs (including aviation, nursing, accounting, and education).

The English Department includes five full-time, tenure-track faculty members; I am the only one who specializes in Composition and Rhetoric. Several of the full-time faculty members teach within the composition program, although generally only one or two full-time faculty teach composition during any given semester. Therefore, most of the composition sections each semester are taught by six or seven part-time adjuncts<sup>2</sup> who each teach one to three sections. This ratio of part-time to full-time faculty is just slightly higher than the national average of fifty percent. Many of these adjuncts teach a variety of writing classes, and our writing series is similar to that of many of universities of our size, ranging from basic writing to research writing. Faculty have noted that teaching a variety of writing courses helps them to have a good understanding of the writing curriculum, and how to help students grow as writers as they move through the curriculum.

In addition to many of our adjuncts teaching a variety of our writing courses, we've been particularly lucky that the majority of them have taught at the university for a number of years, and there is generally a very low level of turnover. This helps maintain stability in the program, but it also provides one important benefit for adjuncts: the ability to maintain fairly consistent teaching schedules each semester. This allows adjuncts to make plans in other areas of their lives and is particularly important to those who teach at another institution as well. While small, this is one working condition that adjuncts have consistently noted as important. Further, the adjuncts' office space is located in the same hallway as the full-time faculty, which leads to spontaneous interactions of both a personal and professional nature.

### **Adjunct Faculty and Students in Our Composition Program**

From my perspective as the Writing Program Administrator, the varied experiences and backgrounds amongst our adjuncts has been a true benefit for students enrolled in our writing courses. Students are able to enroll in a section that will best suit their learning needs, but all sections are working on common goals. This occurs because, as a whole, the adjuncts are willing to learn and discuss composition theory and pedagogy, and are open to new ideas to implement in their classes. This has allowed us to continue to adapt the program in ways that will best benefit the students.

In fact, while this range of experience and perspective strikes me as a true benefit, it can also make program development challenging, as all of our faculty—full-time and part-time—have varied teaching and educational backgrounds, theoretical and pedagogical perspectives, and reasons for teaching at the university. Despite those differences, there are some similarities that can help in program planning. For instance, all of the composition instructors have at a minimum a Master's Degree with experience teaching English. Looking deeper, Steve and Charles<sup>3</sup> are retired high-school English instructors who wanted to continue teaching part-time. Their experience includes teaching literature and composition. Steve is also a prolific writer of prose and poetry on the local and state level. Stan is a long-time college instructor who holds a Ph.D. and works at several colleges in the area. Carol has taught both composition and ESL. Ray works in a staff position at the university, while also teaching one to two courses each semester, and has ESL teaching experience as well. In addition to having Master's degrees in English, June and Ray both have undergraduate Secondary English Education degrees, although each only taught at the high-school level for a short time. As for other employment, June and Steve teach part-time at multiple colleges each semester, and Ray has another full-time job. Most of these adjuncts have been teaching at the university for over five years, which has led to the ability to build community and consistency within the program. I imagine that the variety of instructors here would be found in composition programs at schools like ours across the country.<sup>4</sup> On a personal level, I have found my conversations with them about teaching methods have allowed me to think about our composition program as a whole, as well as my own teaching. I have also been encouraged that even the most senior instructors (in age and experience) are open to trying new things.

Not only are the instructors in our program varied in background, so are the students. That being said, the majority of students at the university

enter as basic writers who have struggled with writing in the past and have had limited experience with writing and revising. In addition, some of them have difficulty reading and test at an early high-school reading level. I have found that defining basic writers, both at our university and nationally, is perilous, as Alice Horning and Jeanie Robertson noted, the importance is to “move the definitions away from a focus on error and toward helping writers develop their ability to probe and express their ideas effectively in writing” (53). This suggestion has compelled me to resist a simplistic view of basic writers at our university and instead consider the types of writing activities that will benefit our diverse student body. One third of the first-year students take the basic writing course each year. So, despite my resistance to classifying and defining basic writers, it is true in fact that basic writers are identified in a fashion that may not take into account their unique experiences. This identification usually comes solely by test scores and grade point averages, which can be problematic. Still it is worthwhile to note that while students at our institution are initially placed by these standardized numbers, they also move into or out of basic writing in a variety of other ways. For instance, students have opportunities to bypass basic writing into the general composition course. Although many students may not be aware of this option or assertive enough to take advantage of it. Importantly, our composition faculty are reminded each semester that as the writing professionals, they should utilize their judgment to recommend students for alternative placement.

When considering our student population, it then becomes even more important to consider the support provided to contingent faculty. They are serving a group of students with varied needs and abilities, and they are coming to this teaching experience with varied personal, educational, and professional backgrounds.

### **DEVELOPING A PILOT TO ENHANCE FACULTY RELATIONS LOCALLY**

Before I considered specific ways to improve faculty relations within our program, I studied best practices in program review and reform. As I embarked, I consistently focused my eye on the local context. While I am well aware of the problems with contingent labor nationally, what was most important to me for this review was to learn what was happening in our local situation and how I might help create positive change. Therefore, I realized that while my research was informal action research, I wanted to do

### Local Efforts to Improve Adjunct Working Conditions

the best I could to utilize some of its basic principles. To gain these insights, I developed a somewhat loose research system that involved various types of data collection. Margaret Riel explains action research and the systems of inquiry developed to gather and process information; she states, “Action research is a process of deep inquiry into one’s practices in service of moving towards an envisioned future, aligned with values. Action research is the systematic, reflective study of one’s actions, and the effects of these actions, in a workplace context” (paragraph 1). These reflective practices then allow the researcher to consider ways to share the results with others as well as to implement program change. Such a system could assist me in developing an ongoing agenda for continuous improvement of our faculty relations as I pursued short- and long-term goals of professional and organizational change. I hope that by sharing the process I used to implement this pilot program, others might consider ways to improve their own local contexts for the benefit of its students and faculty.

I started with the premise that each adjunct needed the opportunity to share their own perspectives about his or her teaching, experiences, and professional goals, rather than me simply making sweeping generalizations based on national surveys and research. Arnold emphasizes that, “before assuming we know what’s best for what is obviously a highly diverse population, it might be more ethical to ask individual faculty members how they would define themselves and what role they want to play in our writing programs” (420). Listening to the needs of faculty, as described by them, will not only positively impact them, it will also improve composition programs as a whole. If we truly want high-quality programs, we must discuss not only the needs of students in the programs, but the needs of the faculty as well. Attending to the working conditions of adjuncts should be at the forefront of attention for writing programs. As Art Young explains, “One way we can ensure that composition is taught effectively is to enhance the working conditions of all who teach composition, even as we experiment and develop models for establishing collegial communities of professionally vigorous teachers and scholars” (101). Therefore, my strategy for considering what change should be implemented within a pilot faculty relations plan started with a general question: *What is the current experience of adjuncts within the English department and how might it be improved?* In order to study this, I first conducted a local departmental scan and took notes on what I saw as strengths and weaknesses. Next I developed a series of open-ended questions and interviewed each of the adjuncts. The interview included questions about their perceptions of their role at the university and within

Jessica Schreyer

the department, specific ways we could improve the composition program, as well as ways that their working conditions could be enhanced. I then developed a proposal for a faculty relations plan and shared it with the adjuncts. During the course of the next academic year, I implemented this plan as a pilot. Following the pilot, I again interviewed each adjunct using open-ended questions. Based on this input, I have been refining our faculty relations activities.

I would like to note that one potential problem with the interviews I conducted is that they were not anonymous. It is therefore a possibility that the adjuncts may not have felt comfortable being extremely upfront about issues they face in their working conditions, particularly with the person overseeing the composition program. I hope my personal relationships with each person would allow them to feel comfortable sharing their true concerns, but I am aware that this may have actually been a barrier to the most candid responses. In the future, I would like to do another program review through a focus group conducted by an outside individual.

### **Areas Addressed through Pilot Faculty Relations Plan**

As I developed the pilot plan, I used the survey data from the faculty to determine a course of action. Generally, faculty felt that their experiences and expertise were respected. They reported that we had by and large provided stability in the number and times of classes adjuncts teach, and interacted with each other on a personal level. That being said, there were definitely areas that needed reform. For instance, adjuncts noted that they often felt uninformed about the trajectory our students had after the composition courses and the way they would use writing in those courses. They felt that there could be a stronger communication of the goals and strategies used within the courses, as well as more communication about how they could work with our specific population of students. They also noted feeling separate from the rest of the faculty and that they lacked opportunities for communication with other faculty. They desired a forum to discuss issues they were facing as teachers, and more specifically, teaching writing at our university.

Based on this information, I piloted a faculty relations plan which addressed two major areas: 1) Offering more professional development opportunities for Composition faculty, and 2) Creating improved communication amongst the Composition faculty.

*Offering more professional development opportunities for Composition faculty:* Creating more relevant and timely opportunities for professional

### Local Efforts to Improve Adjunct Working Conditions

development was one area addressed. At the time, there were no professional development opportunities tailored for composition faculty. Based on adjunct input, I created a special professional development workshop series focused on writing; when creating this series of workshops, I wanted to identify topics that were relevant to the writing instructors first, but also that would be of interest to instructors in other disciplines. Recognizing their vast teaching experience, I asked adjuncts to present on topics they specialize in. Adjuncts have presented on a wide array of topics of interest to faculty across the disciplines, including incorporating successful peer review, helping students make the transition between high school and college writing, conducting successful student-teacher conferences, and finding ways to manage the grading load. The workshops offered a time for people to showcase their teaching methods as well as current pedagogy and theory in composition studies. The professional development series reinforced the connection of our writing program with current research in composition. Much effort was also put into scheduling the workshop for times when the most writing adjuncts would be available, as well as videotaping the sessions so those who could not attend in person might still participate.

*Creating improved communication amongst the Composition faculty:* The preliminary surveys indicated that we needed more personalized contact throughout the semester. Therefore, during the pilot, I implemented a relationship management system similar to one I had learned while working in fundraising with high-level donors. The system—which includes face-to-face discussions, e-mails, and forums for discussion—helps to ensure that people feel valued and heard.

Since the university administration had done a good job of physically locating the adjuncts' shared offices on the same floor as the other English faculty, it lent itself naturally to encouraging a sense of comradeship between the adjuncts and the WPA. During the pilot, I initiated more individualized conversations about their teaching and experiences, and I became more mindful about initiating frequent contact with them, particularly those who identified a desire for that contact. I also began sending out an e-newsletter to the team of faculty teaching composition approximately every other week. This newsletter included information about online seminars the adjuncts could participate in, helpful hints about upcoming campus dates, positive stories about student successes in one of the composition classes, and recognition of the adjuncts for their continued commitment to the program. Finally, I made an effort to individually orient each adjunct to the many programs on campus that were relevant to their students and

Jessica Schreyer

provided reminders about significant resources. At significant times during the semester, I contacted them to explain resources that may be useful to the students at the time.

Based on the surveys, I realized that holding two meetings instead of one would ensure everyone was able to attend one session at their own convenience. The meeting topics were also more focused and included discussing course outcomes, pedagogical strategies, and long-term goal planning. We also built in time for recognition of instructors.

The ultimate goal of the faculty relations plan developed was to create an environment for student success that includes satisfied instructors. The following section assesses the results that emerged following the pilot of the faculty relations plan.

### **REVIEWING THE PILOT FACULTY RELATIONS PLAN: FINDING OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE LOCAL TEACHING CONTEXTS**

Following the pilot, I interviewed the faculty again about their experiences. From these interviews and observational data, affective themes emerged that demonstrated adjunct faculty indeed felt more valued in their roles during and after the plan's implementation, while at the same time some of them remained uncertain about their job stability and place within the university.

#### **Professional Development Workshops Led Faculty to Feelings of Respect for their Expertise**

The faculty expressed that they found many aspects of the faculty relations plan empowering because their professional expertise had been respected. For example, in relation to a series of professional development workshops led by part-time faculty, Steve explains, "Of course, sharing before one's peers is scarier than talking to the general public. Frankly, it should be a professor's responsibility to share in this matter." Further, "there is generally a good turn-out. And, after a hard day, that's saying something. It also shows collegial respect, giving us an opportunity to share our expertise in some area. Often schools hire outside speakers, you use in-house people." While I was initially concerned about asking faculty to take the time out of their schedules to plan and present these programs, clearly the invitation made them feel involved in the department in new ways. After the first semester, an anonymous online survey link was sent to all participants; 89% of the

### Local Efforts to Improve Adjunct Working Conditions

attendees stated they would recommend attending to a colleague. One attendee stated on the survey, “We really have fun during these sessions. They are energizing! The sessions encourage us to share. When one shares, both people grow. That’s what a lot of departments lack—sharing. Many people in some departments don’t even know everyone in the department. This is a way to remedy that lack. Last time there was a lot of interaction. It was comfortable, and as I said, ‘fun!’” The fact that people were enjoying these sessions was reassuring, and the interviews with the faculty reinforced that I need to continue exploring what types of programs and topics will be relevant and interesting.

### **New Communication Methods Led to Feelings of Being Valued**

The faculty stated that they utilized the opportunities that came from the faculty relations plan to ask questions or express concerns to me as the point person for composition. June states, “It has been helpful since a single person was put in charge of maintaining the link for the adjuncts.” They expressed that having a single resource person allowed them to get quick answers to questions or concerns about their teaching or deadlines. In addition to communicating more general information, these conversations also allowed us to develop personal relationships within a teaching community. Carol explained the importance of having open discussions to feel supported, “Having an administrator who is open and responsive to concerns and problems, as well as who will take time to listen to ranting when things don’t go as planned, makes me feel valued as a teacher.” These conversations made me realize that the concerns I had in my own class were experienced by others, and it also allowed me to learn techniques that were effective with our diverse student population. I took pride in being a part of such an engaged group of teachers.

The majority of the faculty pinpointed the newsletter as one of the most encouraging and helpful additions to the program. In the past, adjuncts who could not attend meetings or find time to meet with the full-time faculty often felt out of the loop. This newsletter allowed important information to be sent in a timely manner, and further, for stories to be shared amongst the group. Several of the faculty also noted that they appreciated the positive words of thanks that were included, and felt that they had not had this appreciation expressed to them so directly before.

## **Curricular Input and Autonomy Led to Feelings of Ownership for Program Success**

The faculty noted that they appreciated the autonomy they have historically been allowed in the teaching of their composition courses. By taking time during meetings and seminars to discuss the goals, the adjuncts felt more at ease during their course planning. Even though we have a common textbook and shared outcomes, Steve explains, “I feel like we have lots of flexibility in meeting our course goals; it would be a mistake to demand a certain approach; I find that there are many types of opportunities here for us as teachers. I have flexibility in the curriculum. There is support for my teaching and it is clear that the full-time members of the department respect each of us.” Faculty are given leeway in addressing course outcomes through assignments of their choice. June echoes Steve’s perspective, and states, “I feel autonomous and appreciate that autonomy. As an adjunct, it feels good to know that the department trusts my expertise in identifying strategies to meet the student learning objectives.” I realized that by being even more descriptive in our statement of goals for each composition course during and after our meetings, faculty felt empowered to teach in the ways that work best for them. Carol notes, “I feel valued when I am asked for my input.” By taking time for discussions and input about the curriculum, all composition faculty are involved and active in shaping it. I also took steps to ensure there was follow up on suggestions made during the meetings, which faculty stated gave them a sense of ownership for the composition program’s success and direction.

## **WPA Insights Following Post-Pilot Adjunct Interviews**

The pilot faculty relations plan provided me with insights into our composition program and the faculty teaching in it. I learned about the faculty’s motivation for teaching, and was reminded about the importance of advocating for and recognizing the expertise of adjuncts within the university; I identified goals for the upcoming year, including planning professional development opportunities, improving communication channels, and continuing discussions about curriculum and planning.

While this faculty relations plan led to improved communication and recognition within the department, it did not provide changes to the most critical working conditions such as position stability, pay, or benefits. Obviously, these are key issues in any employment position, and are particularly

important when considering adjunct faculty. Therefore, when weighing the effects of this pilot, it was a very small local change. While it is disappointing that I could not influence these major conditions, it should still be noted that any program to improve conditions for contingent faculty is important to undertake. It is worth the effort to make small, local changes. These changes will also, hopefully, draw attention to the commitment and hard work of part-time faculty within the institutions.

### **CONSIDERATIONS FOR RIVERSIDE UNIVERSITY COMPOSITION PROGRAM'S FUTURE**

Writing courses are often taught by contingent faculty with few resources and little voice on curricula. In an era when universities need to enhance retention of all students, and students have many demands placed on them to be productive writers across the disciplines, it is crucial that programs and supports are provided for composition students and instructors to be successful. While contingent faculty may rightfully express dissatisfaction with their working conditions, most are very committed to student success; this commitment was made all the more clear to me during an interview with June. She states, "I feel like teaching is my mission and that I belong here. I get my students because I have lived lives like theirs, and I love this college." This comment demonstrates how important it is to attend the ongoing needs of adjunct faculty at our university, and to make large-scale, long-term advocacy for composition faculty a priority. These goals can co-exist with efforts toward small-scale, local programs. June identifies with our mission and, in part because of her own background, she is a great fit with the program. This kind of connection is invaluable to the success of our students.

This pilot plan was implemented to enhance faculty relations within our writing program. Through directed programming and communication, we have worked at improving conditions locally. This led faculty to feel increasingly valued within the department, which will help improve our composition programs. Ideally, such efforts will also enhance the classroom experience for students, helping them achieve the student learning outcomes we have set. Finally, as a compositionist, I know I must continue to attend to the needs and concerns of all faculty, both on a local and national level, so our basic writing programs flourish. Of course, to be most effective, advocacy must come from a variety of sources to be effective, including contingent faculty themselves, full-time faculty, and organizations such as WPA, CCCC, and NCTE. Personally, simply taking the time to listen to the stories of the

Jessica Schreyer

contingent faculty at my university has made me more aware of the issues they face, as well as to imagine ways that I can advocate for and with them.

On a long-term basis, the pilot emphasized the need for me, as WPA, to continue advocating for and with contingent faculty by remaining engaged in scholarship and work that supports good working conditions. This need was reinforced by my post-pilot interviews; June states that even when she is satisfied with her position, “Being an adjunct has negative connotations, and at times I feel like I am less important than full-time employees.” Another faculty member, Stan, envisions a future where those teaching writing are promoted within institutions to stable positions: “In this department, I feel my qualifications are respected and that I am not treated as a second-class citizen, as often happens to compositionists. I like to imagine a world where hiring composition instructors is about hiring into full-time positions. So, even though my experience is generally positive in that I feel respected and receive positive feedback, I am still aware that in a contingent labor position I am always waiting for the hammer to fall.” These two comments reinforce the complex nature of the adjunct experience and the need for our continued dedication to the Wyoming Resolution’s goals.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING PROGRAMS**

My own journey of being an adjunct, and then moving to a full-time position, has led me to a deep personal appreciation for the commitment and work that adjuncts offer to institutions. Consequently, I am not satisfied with the small steps I have been able to take from this new position as WPA, because I know my voice is just one, but I am still hopeful. If enough people are engaging in these conversations, progress can be made toward excellent working conditions for all faculty. I am also optimistic that if enough people who have privilege advocate for and with others, change will happen more quickly.

Through dedicated efforts of faculty and administrators, we can aspire to a future where all faculty are working in conditions that are fruitful for themselves and students alike. I look forward to continuing to being a part of these efforts, and ask others to join in for the benefit of basic writing programs everywhere. When I reflect on the work we’ve done to improve adjunct conditions in our small English department, I have come to realize that it is impossible for me to solve all of these issues in a short time, or to imagine that the small steps we made through a pilot program considerably changed conditions. However, by understanding adjuncts’ motivations and

### Local Efforts to Improve Adjunct Working Conditions

their perceptions of their work, perhaps I can have a better understanding of each of them and the ways I can help support them in their teaching. That does not decrease the urgency of solving the larger issues that adjuncts face.

Many of the gains in basic writing have blossomed from work on the local level, and perhaps this local work can help these gains happen for adjunct faculty as well. The creation of the faculty relations plan that was discussed in this essay stemmed from my earnest desire to create a more positive local working environment for adjuncts within our department. By contemplating the constraints adjuncts encounter, and by extracting the affective themes of their words, I hope I have offered an example of a small, simple, and low-cost plan that institutions can take to *immediately* address some of the needs and desires of adjuncts. I am optimistic that recognizing and affirming the work of adjuncts at our institutions will help others understand just how critical their work is to students. As more people within the university system see the importance of this group of faculty, light will be shed on the need to continue to improve working conditions more globally.

As we work towards change, we must also consider how we want our composition programs to continue to develop. David Smit notes that we must reconceptualize what it means to be qualified as a teacher of writing. In fact, many of our adjuncts may have extensive expertise to share under these guidelines, with a focus moving from coursework as a credential to “focus on what potential writing instructors can actually do: in their own writing, in response to the writing of others, and in designing ways to help novices understand the intricacies of the discourse practices of particular communities” (179–180). As I began to formally recognize the expertise and experience of contingent faculty in my own department, I believe it was a move toward professionalizing their work, which in turn will hopefully lead to better material conditions for them. While I cannot even begin to suggest that our program will or has created drastic changes in working conditions, I am optimistic that it has added to the conversation in a way that continues to honor and respect the work being done by contingent faculty. I hope that other writing program administrators will take the time to truly learn about what the adjuncts in their department desire and need from their positions, and also investigate how the conditions at their university influence the composition program and its students.

As we strive to make progress on the goals recommended within the Wyoming Resolution that was drafted almost three decades ago, we must realign our vision within the current academic culture. The New Faculty Majority constituents note, “any efforts to transform college work forces should

Jessica Schreyer

seek to improve the lives of adjunct faculty members already employed by those institutions, rather than replacing those people with others hired for newly created positions” (Schmidt 7). Indeed this statement rings especially true for me, as I was one of those fortunate people who entered a full-time position after years of adjuncting for one institution. Because of my own path, I feel obliged to continue advocating for, and assisting, other adjuncts as they make their own career paths in academia. Part of this obligation, for me, means supporting their professional goals, and doing what I can to help create a positive working environment. Daniell’s commentary on Sledd’s dedication to all faculty, reflecting a fifty year commitment, resonates strongly for me: “And wouldn’t he remind me, as he has reminded the profession, that we cannot talk honestly about improving the teaching of composition until we improve the working conditions of those who teach it” (219). Sledd’s unwavering advocacy is a model for compositionists, and especially WPAs; while I don’t want to *replace* opportunities for others to advocate for themselves, I realize there are times that I may have a voice and they do not. By listening and attending to the professional desires and expertise of adjuncts, universities can tap into the deep reservoirs of knowledge and experience they bring to their teaching. Opportunities for adjuncts to demonstrate this expertise and commitment may provide conduits for making justifications for improved material conditions. Through our combined efforts and respect for each other, we can move towards a positive future for our Composition program, and for the faculty working within that program.

## Notes

1. Prominent composition scholars such as Ira Shor, Eileen Schell, Patricia Lambert Stock, James Sledd, and Carol Crowley, among others, have been advocates of equity and improved conditions for contingent faculty.
2. Within this local context, contingent faculty refers to part-time adjunct professors.
3. Faculty and my institution are referred to using pseudonyms
4. The Coalition on the Academic Workforce recently published a report that is useful in exploring the makeup of the adjunct faculty community (*A Portrait of Part-Time Faculty Members*).

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Jessica Schreyer

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