

CHAPTER 7

THE OTHER INVISIBLE HAND: ADJUNCT LABOR AND ECONOMIES OF THE WRITING CENTER

Dani Nier-Weber

SUNY Sullivan Community College

Threads: Local Changes to Workload, Pay, and Working Conditions;
Organizing Within and Across Ranks

I recently watched an awareness test on *YouTube*, a short clip that asks viewers to accurately count the total number of passes by the team in white during a fast-moving basketball scrimmage. At the end of the clip, I found that I'd counted the number of passes correctly—thirteen—but I'd missed the fact that a giant bear had moonwalked across the court, mid-game. The clip ends with a warning, "It's easy to miss something you're not looking for" (dothetest), then cautions viewers to watch for cyclists. Like most of us, presumably, I didn't see what I was not paying attention to. In *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers* (2013), Jackie Grutsch McKinney calls for those of us working and researching in the field of writing centers to challenge our own deeply held assumptions—to interrogate what she calls the "grand narrative" of writing centers in order to see what we might otherwise miss.

At the intersection between writing centers and contingent faculty, adjunct labor has been particularly invisible. A great deal of the current literature centers squarely around "peer" tutoring, which refers primarily to undergraduate and, to a lesser extent, graduate tutors in the writing center. A search of contingent faculty and writing centers reveals a fundamental confusion even in key search terms; "professional" staff sometimes seems to refer to adjunct (composition) instructors who serve part of their day in the writing center, and sometimes to professional tutors hired solely to work in the writing center but who do not work as instructors (at least not at the same institution), and thus arguably can be counted as another kind of contingent faculty. The labor of tutors in the writing center who are not student "peers" or graduate students, but who perform

similar kinds of—contingent—work, has been little articulated or examined; as yet, the classifications and their distinctions remain unclear and ill-defined. Thus far, little corresponding discussion exists about the particular challenges, ethics, and economics of labor conditions faced by composition adjuncts and other professionals for whom writing center work comprises part, most, or all of the job.

The telling of alternative narratives of writing center labor provides greater space for, as McKinney puts it, “multiple interpretations, thick descriptions, and even dissonance” (34) as we investigate and document what is going on in writing centers. All too often, undergraduate “peer tutoring” is so central to descriptions of writing center work that other realities, whether occurring on the periphery or perhaps increasingly at the center, often go largely unnoticed and un-narrated. Contingent faculty are among the “people and events normally excluded” (McKinney 12) from the dominant conversation; they remain, in many ways, the unsung and invisible hand—the moonwalking bear—of writing center work.

According to McKinney, the largely unchallenged “grand narrative” of writing centers goes like this: *writing centers are comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-on-one tutoring on their writing* (6). McKinney deconstructs multiple aspects of this narrative, taking it apart piece by piece as she challenges 1) metaphors of “home” and “family” that underlie descriptions of writing centers as cozy and comfortable, 2) narratives of the writing center as both a part of and outside the mainstream academic world, i.e., as “outsiders on the inside” (37), and 3) depictions of the peer tutor as iconoclastic maverick. Further, McKinney investigates, among other things, the physical and metaphorical spaces in which writing center work takes place as well as the idea that “all students” benefit from that work. Beyond our usual narratives, in other words, where is the moonwalking bear?

In my experience in three university writing centers, first as assistant director during my graduate studies, then as interim director, then permanent director at a third institution, the centers, like the institutions in which they were housed, spanned a variety of expectations, material conditions, and student and consultant demographics. Two of the universities were relatively small and located in rural, isolated areas. Both largely served first-generation populations of lower socio-economic status, including non-traditional students seeking to create for themselves new opportunities after regional industries and other venues for local employment had diminished or vanished altogether.

The consultants who staffed each center reflected a diversity of characteristics as well. The writing center where I received my training as assistant director was housed in a large, suburban university and staffed by a cohort of undergraduate

and graduate peer consultants, while the second center used only undergraduates, many of whom I inherited and some of whom I hired and trained during my stint as visiting director. In *Peripheral Visions*, McKinney describes the stereotypical peer tutor as

someone who went to a college but was not part of the college—someone who doesn't know the name of the football team's quarterback—own a hoodie or bumper sticker with the school logo, but one who is on a first-name basis with the reference librarian, runs the student Greenpeace chapter, and whose best friend is the town's record shop owner. (35)

The peer tutors I supervised spanned broad differences in styles, approaches, and personality types, from Maria, who had five siblings and who treated student clients like she was their bossy older sister, to Jeff and Kate, a young married couple who—when they weren't playing (or writing about) video games—spent their days in my office giving eagle-eyed reports of every transgression their fellow tutors committed in the center. Following McKinney's resistance to stereotypical assumptions, I could not have identified the common denominator in tutor identity as, say, maverick, activist, or subversive; at the centers in which I worked, consultant identities seemed to cover too broad a spectrum to make any such claims.

At the behest of the administration at my third institution, however, the brand new Writing Center was staffed exclusively with faculty consultants¹: Elizabeth, Michaela, Glen, and me. (Other adjuncts—Karen, Jenny, Cara, and Whitney—would join us over the course of the next two years as schedules allowed/demanded). In part the decision to staff the Writing Center with faculty was due to a problematic history with peer writing tutors, who had needed more training and supervision than another support service had been able to provide them prior to my arrival. Most of these faculty consultants were adjunct composition instructors whose teaching load was partly shifted to hours in the Writing Center. Unlike the programs at my two previous institutions, composition at this university was almost exclusively taught by contingent faculty. In this model, providing ten hours per week in the center of one-on-one consulting and occasional other, related tasks was equivalent to teaching one three-credit composition class. During the first two years a number of adjuncts, including Elizabeth, Cara, and Jenny, along with Glen, a full-time, non-tenure stream assistant professor who had been re-assigned to ten writing center hours a week,

¹ I use the term “faculty consultants” to denote full-time instructors or contingent, part-time composition faculty who also tutor in the writing center—a designation my writing center faculty chose for themselves.

served as part-time faculty writing consultants.

Elizabeth, Cara, and Jenny did not really fit the image of “maverick” or “subversive” tutor. All three had obtained master’s degrees in English from the same local private university and had worked in that university’s writing center as graduate students before being hired as adjuncts at our current institution. Each was assigned between five and fifteen hours per week in the Writing Center while also teaching part-time. Course loads, classes, and writing center hours changed each semester, depending on the needs of the composition and English programs. In fact, the Writing Center would ultimately serve as a “fallback” option for several part- and full-time faculty in both programs whenever classes didn’t fill. Although as director I placed a high emphasis on non-directive, globally-focused consulting practices, I did notice a common characteristic in the approaches Elizabeth, Cara, and Jenny used in both teaching and tutoring sessions, one that coincided with the feedback and assignments students were bringing into the Writing Center from across the composition program: namely, a strong focus on the improvement of lower order errors and numerous formulaic “tips” for sentence, paragraph, and thesis structures. This was closer to what I would call a traditional approach (without negative judgment) than had been the focus of my own education and training. On the whole, however, I had to acknowledge that this approach seemed to fit well with my new institution’s emphasis on “rigor” and on improving bad—error-filled as well as incoherent—student writing.

I also had to acknowledge that, while I deeply believed in the Writing Center’s mission to build a campus-wide cohort of expert student writers and tutors, the overall performance of the new Writing Center with its group of faculty consultants was nothing short of excellent. Not only was the atmosphere as comfortable, fun, and collegial as any writing center I had ever worked in, despite an immediate, high demand from students that did not let up all semester, but we soon received tangible, outside affirmation for the work we were doing as well. After that first semester, the registrar—the “numbers guy” on campus—announced at a composition meeting that retention among freshmen who had visited the Writing Center had increased by up to approximately 30 percent. The professionalism and skill among the full-time and contingent instructors who staffed the Writing Center, in other words, was nothing short of stellar, and we had the results to prove it.



Our brand new Writing Center began in an 8’ x 9’ outer office space that barely held three small tables with two chairs each, which we divided from the adjacent hallway using two tall bookshelves. All of us were either adjunct instructors

(Elizabeth and Michaela) or full-time non-tenure stream faculty (Glen and myself) who also taught in the composition program. Glen, who was supporting a family, routinely taught additional overload courses, while Elizabeth and Michaela carried a load of three classes, or thirty hours per week, in addition to putting in between five and seven and a half hours in the Writing Center. Rapid success and high demand—students and faculty alike, it seemed, had long hungered for help with writing on campus—quickly compelled us to add ten more hours of tutoring, split between two more adjuncts, Karen and Jenny, who both were also already teaching three classes. The following semester Karen, who also worked part time as a copy editor at the local paper and cared for two aging parents, opted out of writing center consulting due to sheer overwhelm. A year later we hired Cara, fresh out of graduate school, as an additional adjunct. Like the others who worked part-time in the Writing Center, Cara devoted between thirty-five and thirty-seven and a half hours per week to the university, spread between the Writing Center and composition, and like every other adjunct with that schedule, also worked a second job in retail—invariably Friday nights, it seemed—to make ends meet. And like many of our adjuncts, Cara also commuted between thirty and forty-five minutes to the university, one way.

Scheduling adjuncts to teach thirty-seven and a half hours a week, I was told, was “pushing it” because the university still officially counted this as “part time” labor. At our institution, adjuncts were paid roughly \$2,000 per ten-hour per week section, or the same amount for the corresponding ten hours in the Writing Center (pay was slightly higher for adjuncts with Ph.D.s, which only Michaela had). According to the university faculty and staff newspaper, pay on our regional campus throughout the ranks was lower than the national average for similarly ranked positions. Happily, our institution offered adjuncts access to health benefits if they committed to teaching at least one three-credit class during both the fall and spring semesters of one academic year. As far as I am aware, nearly all the adjuncts availed themselves of the opportunity to obtain health insurance.

Interestingly, I discovered later, health benefits would not extend to a part-time consultant hired to work only in the Writing Center but not as an adjunct instructor. Part-time consulting was apparently considered a staff, not an instructional, position, and health benefits did not extend to part-time staff. This brought home the reality that, although lip service is often given to the idea that writing center work is, in fact, instruction as opposed to primarily a remedial or support service, there seems to be little awareness outside the discipline of what that actually means.

Another side effect of the part-time status of adjunct faculty at the university became clear when one of our composition instructors applied for a mortgage

over the summer. Although he had been teaching classes at this university, and at least one other institution, for over ten years and was scheduled to teach composition that coming fall, because he was not “officially” employed over the summer the university would not verify his employment. His mortgage application was denied. He eventually straightened it out, but the consequences of residing in that liminal contingent space—employed yet not employed—created stress and hassle for him and his family that, as I saw it, seemed unnecessary and unwarranted.

The dominant narrative about the adjuncts on our campus, as mostly young graduate students who would soon move on, did not, in fact, reflect the material reality of the lives of most of the adjuncts who actually worked there. In the prevailing view of at least certain members of the administration, who made decisions about hours hired, pay offered, and positions created, adjuncts were continually depicted in scheduling and other conversations as a temporary, part-time, and transient labor force. While Elizabeth, for one, had indeed applied that first year to several doctoral programs around the state—and with her gift for multi-modal composition, I believed, could eventually create for herself a fine career in that specialty—the reigning narrative did not accurately describe the situation most of our adjuncts found themselves in. In part because we were a rural institution, many of our faculty as well as our students were extraordinarily place-bound. One of our adjuncts had been teaching at the university for seventeen years, while Karen had been there for eleven (and vividly recalled the last raise she had received, \$50 seven years previously). Almost every adjunct who was a long-time employee of the university was there because of family; they wanted to live with or near parents, aging or otherwise, with husbands who had permanent, local jobs, or they had grown up in the area and did not want to leave. Although one adjunct, Jenny, eventually took a full-time job at a local private high school that paid little better than the adjunct job she left, and Cara eventually found a similar adjunct position closer to home, many if not most of the others would likely have freely chosen to remain at the university long-term if the university had offered them a “real” job—that is, a position that enabled them to adequately support themselves and view their own work as part of a legitimate, long-term career. Most of them remained in any case. Clearly, the justification for low paying jobs based on a narrative of temporariness and transience worked to perpetuate the very impermanence that characterized these contingent yet professional lives, not to mention negatively impacting the material realities of those lives.

As a new director who had previously worked mainly with peer tutors, I only slowly became aware of the extent to which the university failed to view adjuncts as full-fledged contributors to the professional culture on campus. No-

tably, the university prided itself publicly as an institution that focused above all on teaching excellence, which I assumed included professional development for all our instructors. I focused on professional development in the Writing Center from the beginning. At our first meeting of the year, consultants chose topics for monthly workshops to help address whatever issues arose. We read theory, literature, and research, prepared for discussion, and shared materials, questions, and ideas.

At my previous institutions, I had helped peer tutors write proposals to two regional writing center and peer tutoring conferences, so when the opportunity arose for our faculty writing center consultants to submit a proposal to the International Writing Center Association Collaborative, I did not hesitate to suggest we give it a try. As much as an exercise in professional development and collaborative writing as for any other reason, the consultants and I researched, brainstormed, and then collaboratively wrote the proposal. Every participant contributed something valuable, even Michaela, who stated she would not be able to afford to go if the proposal were accepted. We were so encouraged by our success that we submitted a similar proposal—a workshop that would solicit different feedback from each audience and allow us to gather interesting data about writing center cultures across the country—to the regional writing center conference as well.

To our delight, first the national and then the regional proposal were both accepted. We then set about trying to find funding, including applying for the travel grants and scholarships offered through the organizations that had sponsored both conferences. My gratification at our success, however, was short-lived. In a rare visit to the Writing Center, my supervisor told me that I had put the university under duress to fund adjunct attendance at the conferences, and that this was problematic. On that, and on at least three subsequent occasions, I was admonished not to apply to conferences again (as a group, I assumed), and if we did, to only apply to local conferences, and then only if we had obtained prior permission.

Although I had not intended to put pressure on the university, and I never approached the administration to request financial support, I realized I had unwittingly created a situation where at least some administrators felt they would “look bad” if they did not offer any funding. Graciously, the university found funding to partially support the adjuncts’ attendance at the national conference, albeit on the condition that the adjuncts present “what they learned” to my supervisor upon their return. I was also clearly told that there were to be no expectations of future funding and that I could not use funds I had carefully set aside in my budget to pay for conference fees on the assumption that attendance was more valuable for us than, say, purchasing Writing Center T-shirts (fortu-

nately, this ban was later lifted). In the end, only one (other than Michaela) was unable to attend the conference due to financial constraints. Beyond the faculty development grant I regularly applied for and received (with or without travel companions), the total cost to the university from all sources for two adjuncts to attend the national conference and three to attend the regional conference was under \$1000, plus the regular \$250 allotment I would have spent on my own travel in any case, which paid for all lodging and gas at the regional writing center conference.

Rhetorically, adjuncts were cast both as transitory and as representatives of the university, at least insofar as their inability to fulfill an obligation might reflect badly on the institution, but also implicitly as second-class and of course, once again, contingent. I began to see fault lines that had previously been invisible to me, the hierarchies and divisions of the campus culture—another moonwalking bear. I had naively assumed that working toward a common goal, i.e., improving instruction through professional development, would take precedence over other, less pressing (at least to me, if wrongly) considerations such as the “appropriateness” of funding professional development for adjuncts. I became much more careful about making such assumptions, including assumptions about the positionality of adjunct faculty and the legitimacy of their professional development outside of internal Writing Center meetings.

Further, it was also stressed repeatedly in composition meetings that providing contingent faculty with financial or professional support might engender resentment on the part of full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty. This view—which cast professional development and scholarly engagement as a zero-sum game, with clear winners and losers—was communicated so clearly that, after one meeting at which the director of composition reiterated the point, Cara (the youngest member of the group) stood up and exclaimed with obvious bewilderment, “I had no idea the faculty resented us so much!” I question that narrative; I am not sure whether this view was generally shared across the campus, or perhaps stemmed from one or two lone, if influential, voices in the division, in which case it would be unfair to paint the majority of faculty with that broad (and ugly) brush. The effect, however, was the same. Contingent faculty’s lesser—less important—status came through loud and clear to all. I became more aware as well that whenever I was silent in the face of exploitative or unfair practices, I was essentially providing tacit approval for exactly those sorts of conditions.

The following year, I will note, Elizabeth and others were still regularly referring to various ideas, strategies, and pedagogical approaches we had encountered at both conferences. Although I had blundered into a victory, perhaps a fleeting one, I did notice two things. First, a conversation opened up on the campus, at

least in various discursive pockets, about possible sources of funding for professional development for adjuncts, and that conversation has yet to be concluded. And second, the dividends of our small success permanently altered our own internal professional conversations within the Writing Center, and very much for the better. They are still paying off.

~ ~ ~

At a recent workshop given by Beth Carroll, Writing Center director from Appalachian State University, Carroll called the quiet research adjuncts do in their fields, unrecognized and unrewarded, the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” of academia—yet another aspect of adjunct life that remains invisible. The hunger of at least some academics in adjunct positions, like Elizabeth and Michaela, to freely participate in “the” academic culture, to be counted as fully legitimate members of the community, often somehow remains invisible, unacknowledged, and at worst, unimportant. Particularly striking, especially for writing centers and composition instructors, is that on the other hand the conversation about needing better instruction, better writing, better student writers, is ongoing and loudly vocal across the disciplines—and across the country. Jeffrey Zorn’s August 28, 2013 article, “English Compositionism as Fraud and Failure,” is only one recent example in a long string of scathing laments about how “Johnny can’t write” (and it’s all composition’s fault). (And why doesn’t the writing center fix it?)

If teaching composition is so important, however, then why aren’t we investing institutional support in faculty development? Why aren’t we at least recognizing the longstanding, if fluid, commitments that actually do exist on both sides? Why don’t we—who are academics—interrogate and resist the dominant narratives of transience that help not only create, but perpetuate, systems of impermanence and exploitation? Why do we continue to marginalize exactly those laborers in the trenches who perform some of our most crucial work? Such dominant narratives are particularly bewildering in light of adjunct work that takes place on the front lines of retention, not to mention the contributions adjuncts make that support the existing, at times aristocratic, culture. In our division, for example, adjuncts taught a great number of Friday classes, thus relieving tenured faculty from pressure by the administration to balance course loads and meet complicated scheduling needs across the entire work week. Yet adjunct contributions to favored faculty scheduling went unacknowledged at division meetings whenever scheduling was discussed.

The recognition, along with alternative understandings, of adjunct work, however, goes beyond mere calls to address the flaws in an increasingly exploitative system out of altruistic or lofty ethical motives. Beyond the grand writing center narratives identified by McKinney, I had begun to see an even bigger

moonwalking bear—a different common denominator among consultants that applied across the entire spectrum of writing center staff, but perhaps particularly to the faculty adjuncts with whom I was working. Key to writing center labor was the desire and ability to build positive, nurturing relationships; in fact, I began to see the consultants, each in their own individual way, as often driven by a *compelling desire to help others*. As much as writing centers attracted mavericks, nerds, and iconoclasts, they also attracted people who wanted to contribute, be of service, and make a difference.²

I would add, then, to the grand narrative of writing center work the core characteristic of *relational*. Born of the impulse on the part of consultants, directors, and very often student-clients as well, to build positive relationships, whether for the next thirty or fifty minutes, over the course of the semester, or even beyond, relationship is the beating heart of the writing center. I see this core characteristic as both empowering writing centers and contributing to their (ongoing?) marginalization as contingency encroaches into even this hospitable space. Further, this impulse toward relationship is at least as descriptive of contingent faculty consultants as it is of undergraduate peer tutors. One might, in fact, argue that

adjuncts are drawn to Writing Centers because Writing Centers—by design—*should* be congenial spaces to work in for people who want to feel connectedness in a way that conventional classroom assignments may deny them as adjuncts. That is, it IS different for them than for peer tutors or grad students on TA assignments, or what have you. They ARE closer to the stereotypical iconoclastic writing center consultant than the average peer tutor is, at least in that very substantive way. (Kahn)

In other words, one key value that attracts students, staff, and faculty to the writing center may be the desire to serve others, because that—relationally, cooperatively, collaboratively—is at the center of our mission.

Further, I suggest that this desire is not merely an attitude of wanting to provide help, support, and service, but can be defined more broadly as directly centered in a (feminist) ethic of care that defines *caring* as both a value and a practice. In *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*, Virginia Held characterizes an ethic of care as a focus on relationships between inter-reliant actors rather than on the individual autonomy and independence that defines a self-interested capitalist society. Relationships are not primarily seen as occur-

² According to writer Ariel Schwartz and others, this is also a key characteristic of our current generation of students.

ring between rational agents of equal power, but as occurring between people who are “relational and interdependent, morally and epistemologically” (14), and who may, at various stages of life, experience actual dependency as well. Caring, in other words, includes services—such as the interested and informed audience the writing center offers—that receiving parties could not necessarily provide for themselves. Further, traits such as “sympathy, empathy, sensitivity, and responsiveness” (10), which Held identifies as core to the ethics of care, correspond seamlessly to core components of writing center work; in both arenas, the “values of trust, solidarity, mutual concern, empathetic responsiveness have priority . . . relationships are cultivated, needs are responded to, and sensitivity is demonstrated” (Held 15-16). The success of any writing center session is defined by cooperation and collaboration as well as the consultant’s ability to do a close reading—of the text, the student, the assignment, the situation, the moment—i.e., an ability that requires, among other skills, masterful utilization of the sets of traits listed above.

Admittedly, depicting the labor of adjunct consultants as caring may play into the stereotype of the service work of writing centers as “feminized” (and perhaps “feminized?”), i.e., as “mothering” in the sense of the overarching nurturing family metaphor that frames writing centers—and arguably the field of composition. As Held also acknowledges, constructing work as “feminine” contributes to the exploitation of those—typically women and minority groups—who “perform much of the paid but ill-paid work of caring” (Held 16). Necessarily, in the eyes of traditional institutional assumptions that privilege “research and group instruction, not service and individualized instruction” (Janetta et al. 16), such service work is also regarded as subordinate or lesser and is generally less rewarded in academia (and certainly elsewhere). In general, as Janetta et al. note, research by Balester and McDonald shows that directors of writing centers in comparison to writing program administrators are “less likely to be in tenure track positions, to be granted faculty status, and to be Composition specialists” (21). Similarly, as Joan Tronto and others have pointed out, altogether “caring activities are devalued, underpaid, and disproportionately occupied by the relatively powerless in society (31)” (qtd. in Held 18). The generally lower status of writing centers and writing center directors is representative of the lower status with which service work, and exponentially adjunct labor, are institutionally regarded.

The central importance, nonetheless, of the relational nature of writing center work to consultants and students can routinely be seen, for example, in the results of end-of-session and end-of-semester surveys collected by many writing centers. At the institution where I served as assistant writing center director, the total number of positive responses that year to the question of overall satisfaction

with their writing center experience was 98 percent, of which 637 responses, or 71 percent, were very satisfied and 238, or 27 percent of overall responses, were satisfied. Similarly, in exit survey results at the institution where I served as visiting director, 234 responders, or also 98 percent, deemed the writing center's services helpful, while only six responders, roughly 2 percent, found us not helpful (including one, perhaps inevitable, "hell no").

Comments on all three centers at which I have worked expressed student appreciation in multiple ways: "Thank you Maria! I appreciate the time and patients [sic] you provided in helping me write an abstract. Words can not [sic] adequately express my feelings to what we accomplished today. You are a blessing! Thanks! Thanks! Thank you!" "Elizabeth did an excellent job. She was very patient, helpful, and friendly. I would highly recommend the Writing Center to current . . . students. Thank you for providing such a wonderful service for students." "I think that the Writing Center is the most helpful place that anyone could get help from for essays." "Cool stuff happens in my head when i'm here." "Raises for all tutors!" "The Writing Center is my new best friend!" And my favorite: "He was very helpful, suggestive, and nice." Across the board, complaints centered almost exclusively around a lack of sufficient time for sessions or the occasional crowdedness of the space.

The central, relational nature of writing center work thus supports two core goals: 1) to build human capital, that is, to increase human knowledge and skills, and 2) to build social capital, that is, to create the relationships that support and sustain goal #1, above. Presenting at a regional conference in 2009, writing center consultant Philip Call explained it this way: "These social networks between people and the norms of reciprocity that arise from them are known as 'social capital' . . . they constitute another convergence point between philanthropy and writing centers." These are not merely "touchy-feely," feel-good positives; as seen in the retention results mentioned above, they support "actual relations that are 'trusting, considerate, and caring'" (Held 12), which in turn support learning. Relationships, research has repeatedly shown, are crucial in creating the "communities of inquiry" that help students to "assume responsibility to actively construct and confirm meaning" (Swan et al. 4) and to communicate purposefully in an atmosphere of trust. Our students recognize this; professor of psychology Christy Price asserts that millennials "seem to care more about who we are and how we interact with them, than they care about what we know . . . [and they] highly value positive interactions with their professors" (4). As Dewey and many others have recognized, social networks and nurturing learning communities are necessary to student success.

The idea of writing center labor as a reciprocal, relational resource—as "giving," caring work—applies especially to contingent faculty who bring additional

expertise to the table. Occasionally, in my observation, contingent faculty will err on the side of drawing too few boundaries, going a few too many extra miles and offering more of their time and energy than has been or can reasonably be asked of them. While it is crucial for directors to be aware of this tendency, and to protect individual adjunct faculty from over-volunteering their time and effort, as a group writing center workers are a rich, abundant source of human and social capital. It is also important to note that writing instructors have chosen a giving and relational profession, even though it often pays little and offers little prestige. Composition adjuncts and writing center faculty consultants form, in fact, a caring and infinitely renewable resource that will arguably remain abundant—and important—as long as there are universities, students, faculty, staff, and writing centers.

~ ~ ~

According to the Writing Center Research Project (WCRP) at the University of Arkansas Little Rock, the number of contingent faculty (as well as that of other demographics) working in writing centers has been steadily increasing over the last decade. For example, the WCRP reports the total percentage of undergraduate tutors at a variety of institutions who responded to the survey, including two-year and four-year, public and private universities, as follows: 72.5 percent in AY 2001-2002, 81 percent in AY 2003-2004, 77 percent in AY 2005-2006, and 79 percent in AY 2007-2008. These numbers show an increase of just under 10 percent overall for the seven year period for peer tutors in writing centers. Over the same period, however, the percentage of graduate student tutors increased nearly 35 percent, from 15 percent in AY 2001-2002 to 49 percent in AY 2007-2008; the percentage of faculty tutors saw more than a 20 percent increase, from 7.5 to 30 percent over the same period; and the percentage of professional staff serving as consultants increased by more than 25 percentage points, from 4 to 30 percent, during that time (see Fig. 1) (McKinney, “Re: Thanks”).

Table 7.1 Changes in demographics of writing center consultants

	2001-2002	2007-2008	% Increase
Undergraduate tutors	75.2%	79%	approx. 10%
Graduate student tutors	15%	49%	approx. 35%
Faculty tutors	7.5%	30%	over 20%
Professional staff consultants	4%	30%	over 25%

Clearly, the work of writing centers is being distributed differently over the spectrum of academic workers than the literature has reflected up to now. In part, these shifts in the distribution of labor may perhaps be due to an attempt,

as I believe was true of my third institution, to “professionalize” writing centers and to ensure a certain assumed level of consistent, quality support. On the other hand, however, the increasing use of adjunct faculty, with all the attendant conditions and pressures, is at the same time serving to increasingly “casualize” the work of the writing center, as faculty who work there are barred from accessing the same opportunities for professionalization and advancement as faculty in other disciplines—or, conversely, as they are relegated to the same diminished professional space as adjuncts in composition and other fields.

If composition is the step-child of the disciplines, and writing centers are perhaps the step-child of composition, the adjuncts who work in writing centers are the step-children locked away in the closet under the stairs. Questions remain, for me, about institutional goals and priorities as well as the underlying reasons for enforcing strict hierarchies of position, privilege, and place—especially, it would seem, when it does not best serve the greater good, or the students, of the institution. Writing centers are, however, and possibly have been from the beginning, at the forefront of alternative—and yes, iconoclastic—practices, modeling non-hierarchical, egalitarian approaches to serving, supporting, building relationships with, and learning alongside and along with, each other. Writing centers have always worked to increase the human and social capital upon which we all ultimately depend. Such giving work is of great value, whether or not it is currently institutionally *valued*. The writing center, in other words, may be exactly where many adjuncts who crave affirming and effective relationships want to be, even as this space, too, is perhaps increasingly characterized by practices and policies that ensure their marginalization. To paraphrase McKinney’s description of the stereotypical peer tutor, adjunct faculty “work at the college but are not part of the college” (35).

The giving work that writing centers exemplify also draws upon the sustainable and renewable resource of human relationships. This labor maps a different way to *make things work* than older models based on hierarchy, scarcity, competition, vast inequalities, and the zero-sum games—destructive ill-distribution of resources, the dominance of individual egos to the detriment of entire communities—that increasingly plague our human economies. In the end, students need to learn to write—and write well. Workers need to earn respect and respect each other. As a species, we need to find sustainable ways of nurturing each other and the planet. Our students have plenty to say, but they need to learn how to say it in ways that allow them to be heard. That is where we—compositionists, adjuncts, writing center workers—come in.

As do feminist ethics of care, this way of seeing “offers suggestions for the radical transformation of society” (Held 12) based on definitions of caring as “ethically important . . . express[ing] ethically significant ways in which we

matter to each other, transforming interpersonal relatedness into something beyond ontological necessity or brute survival” (Bowden qtd. in Held 33). This of course may also suggest radically different, expanded models for honoring adjunct labor. In “Iceberg Economies and Shadow Selves: Further Adventures in the Territories of Hope,” author Rebecca Solnit describes the effects of a “brutal” economic system that “ensures that hungry and homeless people will be plentiful amid plenty” (n.p.). She also posits, however, a “shadow system” (n.p.) that already exists, outside of the dominant narrative. The shadow system provides food, support, shelter, “and a thousand other forms of practical solidarity, as well as emotional support” (n.p.) for those who have been unable to claw their way to the top—or even to a comfortable middle—in the existing hierarchies of recognition, support, and security, but who labor on all the same. The shadow system Solnit envisions could well describe the world created and inhabited by largely invisible adjunct labor:

Think of the acts of those . . . who do more, and do it more passionately, than they are paid to do; think of the armies of the unpaid who are at “work” counterbalancing and cleaning up after the invisible hand and making every effort to loosen its grip on our collective throat . . . Capitalism is only kept going by this army of anti-capitalists, who constantly exert their powers to clean up after it, and at least partially compensate for its destructiveness. Behind the system we all know, in other words, is a shadow system of kindness, the other invisible hand. (n.p.)

Adjunct labor, then, may now be not only the other “invisible hand” of the university but increasingly the invisible dancing bear of the writing center as well. According to Solnit, the work of that invisible hand, in conjunction with the work of the rest of us—the giving hands, the open hands, writing large on the walls of writing centers, composition programs, and across the university—does not yet “know itself or its own power” (n.p.) But it should, says Solnit. “We all should” (n.p.). That narrative reconfigures, re-narrates, and re-envision service, adjunct labor, not as lesser or inferior, but as one of the driving forces behind a working, caring world.

Surely that, too, is one story we can tell.

WORKS CITED

Call, Philip. “Exploring the Writing Center’s Convergence with Social Capital.” *Converging at the Vanishing Point*, East Central Writing Center Association, Confer-

- ence, Lansing, MI, Apr. 2010.
- “Consultant Levels.” *The Writing Centers Research Project*. University of Louisville, 2004. 5 Oct. 2013. coldfusion.louisville.edu/webs/as/wcrp/reports/report_consultant_level_type.cfm.
- Davis, Kevin. “Life Outside the Boundary: History and Direction in the Writing Center.” *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1995, pp. 5-7, wlnjournal.org/archives/v20/20-2.pdf.
- Held, Virginia. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford UP, 2006.
- Ianetta, Melissa, et al. “Polylog: Are Writing Center Directors Writing Program Administrators?” *Composition Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2006, pp. 11-42.
- McKinney, Jackie Grutsch. *Peripheral Visions*. Utah State UP, 2013.
- . “Re: Thanks.” Received by Dani Nier-Weber, 9 Apr. 2013.
- Price, Christy. “Why Don’t My Students Think I’m Groovy?: The New R’s for Engaging Millennial Learners.” *Millennial Traits and Teaching*, Ed. Thomas A. Lifvendahl, 2009, 5 Oct. 2013, www.drtoomlifvendahl.com/Millennial%20Characturistics.pdf.
- Schwartz, Ariel. “Millennials Genuinely Think They Can Change The World and Their Communities.” *fastcoexist.com. Fast Company*, 27 Jun 2013, www.fastcoexist.com/1682348/millennials-genuinely-think-they-can-change-the-world-and-their-communities.
- Solnit, Rebecca. “Iceberg Economies and Shadow Selves: Further Adventures in the Territories of Hope.” *Tomdispatch.com*. Tomdispatch.com, 22, Dec. 2010, www.tomdispatch.com/post/175335/tomgram%3A_rebecca_solnit_a_shadow_government_of_kindness.
- Swan, Karen, et al. “A Constructivist Approach to Online Learning: the Community of Inquiry Framework.” *Information Technology and Constructivism in Higher Education: Progressive Learning Frameworks*, edited by Carla R. Payne, IGI Global, 2009, pp. 43-57.
- Transport for London. “Test Your Awareness: Do the Test.” 10 Mar. 2008, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahg6qcgoy4.
- Zorn, Jeffrey. “English Compositionism as Fraud and Failure” *Academic Questions*, vol. 26, no. 3, nas.org/articles/english_compositionism_as_fraud_and_failure.