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Introduction from the Guest Editors

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Andrew Bowman is the staff organizer for the Campus Faculty Association, the organizing committee representing faculty on the University of Illinois campus working toward unionization. Before stepping away from academic work, his research focused on the intersection of critical university studies, labor studies, and genre studies. His work has appeared in *Spark: A4C4Equality Journal*, *Xchanges*, and *Composition Studies*.

This special issue of *Academic Labor: Research & Artistry* examines intersections of poverty with academic life. From worsening working conditions to increasing food and housing insecurity to pressures on major selection and career trajectories, poverty's impact on higher education cannot be overstated. Such changes in the academic workforce have been traced by labor unions like the American Federation of Teachers who estimate in recent reports that 75 percent of faculty are non-tenure track, a dramatic shift from early decades when those percentages were reversed. These changes have ushered in what Adrianna Kezer, Tom DePaola, and Daniel Scott refer to as the "gig academy," which they define as "a university that has become fully dependent on a patchwork of loosely connected contingent workforces to service both its central missions and its day-to-day operations" (36). These contingent workers labor in poor working conditions that include "subsistence wages; lack of benefits, retirement funds, and vacation time; no influence over conditions of work or structures of advancement; and constant anxiety over the possibility of arbitrary termination" (Kezar et al. 36-37).

Poverty and austerity aren't just problems for faculty; 58 percent of students were experiencing food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness in the year 2020, according to Temple University's Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. Kezar, DePaola, and Scott's analysis points to the depth of these changes across academia—faculty, students, administrative staff, and building/food service workers—all feel the pinch of contingency, the pressure of just-in-time labor (Watkins), and the precarity of these neoliberal economic

policies. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated these trends by pushing thousands out of the profession early in the pandemic's onslaught, increasing the workload and responsibilities of the faculty and staff still working at universities, and leaving both faculty and students with increased levels of burnout (McClure et al.). Our authors helpfully expand our understanding of poverty's effects on academia. Below we'll provide a brief overview of our authors' research, surfacing common themes through and across the articles.

Article Summaries

In Harvey J. Graff's article, "The Causes and Consequences of Poverty & Impoverishment in Academia, Past, and Present," Graff carefully notes patterns of both change and continuity in discussions of "poverty in academia." Complicating the rosy picture of academia's halcyon days of yore, Graff notes that "there were no 'good old days'" (12); instead, Graff points to inequities ever present in universities (for both faculty and students) and the gap in the study of "universities in the marketplace," which rarely address issues of labor or poverty. Even as Graff complicates the history of academic labor, he singles out the current moment, "almost all matters have worsened. That is inescapable" (14). Still, there is opportunity for universities to chart a better course, and Graff suggests that it will take the communication, cooperation, and collaboration of the full cast of characters that make a university work/run/be to move in that direction.

In Bethany Hellwig and Alex Evans's article "The Culture of Poverty in the Ivory Tower," they blend autoethnography and institutional ethnography to articulate their experiences of poverty and contingency in higher education. Through their experiences and drawing on Gramsci's work, they articulate the notion of a "culture of poverty," which they define as "the ways that individuals within institutions of higher education sustain beliefs and practices that cement poverty as central to individual and institutional identity within the academy, limiting our collective imagination for more just and equitable systems and interventions" (30). Their autoethnographic vignettes further articulate how these cultures of poverty are socially maintained and the affective wreckage they leave in their wake.

In Anwesha Chattopadhyay's article "Paternalism and Penury of the POC PhD Student," Chattopadhyay traces the historical trajectories regarding the intersectionality of marginalization experienced by persons of color, both international and domestic. Noting how conceptions of international graduate students often homogenize their experiences, Chattopadhyay pushes readers to consider the long-term economic impact of graduate student poverty and ends the article with concrete suggestions that institutions could take to alleviate poverty for graduate workers and make their working conditions more equitable, humane, diverse, and inclusive.

In Sheri Rysdam's article, "Precarity, Political Economy, and the Accommodated Classroom," Rysdam articulates a vision for the "accommodated classroom" as a new norm for learning in precarious times. Based on her experience of pregnancy in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, Rysdam draws from the works of bell hooks and Victor Villanueva to articulate a liberatory pedagogy of accommodation. Rather than treating accommodation as exceptional, Rysdam offers a model that asks, "how can I better hear you," with the

understanding that accommodations are not fixed needs but a deeply contextual and ongoing negotiation between student and teacher.

In Cathryn Molloy's article, "A Framework for Embracing Interdisciplinarity in the Context of Job-Readiness Imperatives in College Curricula," Molloy articulates the pressure of direct-to-industry pipelines in academic programs as tuition costs rise and economic conditions worsen for many. Asking "how can we create curricula that allows for passionate exploration, play, and self-discovery—keys to the development of an enlightened, judicious, and thoughtful citizen and soft skills—while also helping students to unambiguously see the future careers and selves they might inhabit? How can we teach courses that students, internship providers, and potential employers will interpret as valuable while also honoring students' rights to exploring areas of interest for their own sake?" (60), Molloy proposes a framework that could be employed in the development of such curricula by "embracing interdisciplinarity," "leaving ample room for play, vulnerability, exploration, and self-discovery," "including opportunities for reflections on a wide variety of potential futures," and "having clear, career-oriented student learning outcomes (SLOs) that map to current job ads and follow key industry trends" (63). Molloy's work urges those engaged in curricular development to consider the whole student—noting their complex needs and motivations for being in the classroom—and to consider both the economic and social factors that may influence them.

Central Themes

Reading across the articles in this issue, two key themes stood out to us: the additional demands placed on faculty and students and how they experience these struggles, and the economic considerations—justified or not—that shape (and have shaped) academic and curricular policy across time. Our authors showed the emotional consequences of poverty by sharing their personal stories of life in the academy. These narratives demonstrate the human costs of low wages and poor working conditions in a way that a purely economic analysis cannot. The fact that everyone from one of the most senior faculty in our field to the newest graduate student has a personal story of precarity highlights the scale and depth of the problem and its continuing significance for higher education. We thank our authors for sharing these (often deeply personal) stories which demonstrate the costs of our current way of doing things and offer visions for a more liberatory path forward.

In addition to these affective framings of poverty at the university, our authors examine the economic histories of higher education as well as current economic realities to illustrate the long history of academic disinvestment and how we can shift such trajectories. From classrooms to departmental learning outcomes and institutional cultures, authors across this special issue consider the economic ramifications of poverty and its pressures on students, faculty, and administrators. Many authors advocate for collective action and increased collaboration to address precarity and develop cultures of abundance and access.

The Path Ahead

Finally, we are sharing a report by Thomas Miller and Charles McMartin that examines the employment trajectories of early-career faculty in composition, rhetoric, and writing studies.

Based on thirty interviews of recent graduates, Miller and McMartin center their discussion on leadership and its challenges and opportunities in the current moment of shifting employment and working conditions. Miller and McMartin distill their findings into ten key lessons. Three of these lessons especially resonate with themes discussed in our other contributions. These are:

1. The wellness of early-career faculty and staff is a collective concern and not just an individual accommodation.
2. The leaders in place in departments need to be recognized and supported as part of such collaborative efforts.
3. Such efforts must recognize and support nontenure-track faculty as vital contributors to the leadership in place in departments.

This report will prepare readers for Issue 9 of ALRA, which invites proposals regarding the future of labor in the academy.

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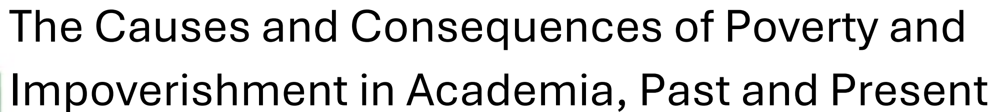
The Causes and Consequences of Poverty and Impoverishment in Academia, Past and Present



Harvey J. Graff

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Harvey J. Graff is Professor Emeritus of English and History at The Ohio State University and inaugural Ohio Eminent Scholar in Literacy Studies. Author of many books about literacy and the history of literacy, children and youth, cities, interdisciplinarity and higher education, he has written about a variety of contemporary and historical topics for *Times Higher Education, Inside Higher Education, Academe Blog, Washington Monthly, Publishers Weekly, Against the Current, Columbus Free Press,* and newspapers. *Searching for Literacy: The Social and Intellectual Origins of Literacy Studies* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2022. *My Life with Literacy: The Continuing Education of a Historian. The Intersections of the Personal, the Political, the Academic, and Place* is in press with WAC Clearinghouse/University Press of Colorado. *Reconstructing the "Uni-versity" from the Ashes of the "Multi- and Mega-versity"* is in progress for Lexington Books/Bloomsbury.

In 2024, or 2000 or 2010, we have no collective or historical memories of student poverty as a constant in the recent and distant past. We have no memories that new PhDs regularly faced a job crisis at least as severe as that of the last decade. But there were almost no tenure-track positions in the late 1950s to early 1960s, in the first half of the 1970s, and at various times in the 1980s-1990s-2000s. Data are sketchy. Memories are real. Still, the radically uneven literature pits one golden age of neverland against another.[1]

Contemporary recognition of the plight of many graduate and undergraduate students, and adjunct faculty, redirects attention to poverty in academia. Renewed attention falls on *some* of the *causes* but not on the *consequences and contradictions.* Typically, we repeat myths and stereotypes. Our vision is too narrowly focused and short-sighted. We exaggerate the novelty of the multiple, interacting problems. We simplify understandings of causes and consequences, and the range of possible *mediations.* We should not think in terms of one or two overarching *solutions*.

Commentaries on student poverty do not make necessary connections to age, social class, race, gender, and ethnic patterns across the United States and in the birth nations of international and migrant students. For example, inquiries today should begin with sociologist Matthew Desmond's (2023a) critical account *Poverty, by America*. Desmond (2023a, 2023b) is especially good on the contradictions and the special case of the United States.

[1] See Graff (2024j, forthcoming b, and References below).

Although dated, the best works on the subject of the economic power of schooling remain the following: W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson's (2004) *The Education Gospel: The Economic Power of Schooling*, their (2005) "Vocationalism in Higher Education: The Triumph of the Education Gospel," and Lazerson's (1998) "The Disappointments of Success: Higher Education After World War II." Contrast these publications with Jon Shelton's (2023) ahistorical and ideological *The Education Myth: How Human Capital Trumped Social Democracy*. Taken together, these works remind us that higher education is also part of a political economy, as both cause and an effect.

Surprisingly *and* unsurprisingly, the topics of this special issue do not feature in such diverse books as Christopher Newfield's (2008) *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* or its close companion from 2016, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*; Steven Brint's (2018) *Two Cheers for Higher Education: Why American Universities Are Stronger Than Ever—and How to Meet the Challenge They Face*; or, Michael M. Crow and William B. Dabars's (2015) *Designing the New American University*. The most recent former elite university presidents' tomes also ignore pressing issues that permeate "student life," today's rhetoric of marketing and communications, *and* student lives at all levels: Nicolas Dirks's (2024) *City of Intellect: The Uses and Abuses of the University* and Derek Bok's (2024) *Attacking the Elites: What Critics Get Wrong—and Right—About America's Leading Universities.* How little direct attention students receive in the higher education literature is striking especially in contrast to newspapers and social media.

The only book-length collection of essays is a dated one edited by Cary Nelson (1997): *Will Teach for Food: Academic Labor in Crisis*, which has a near exclusive focus on graduate students' organizing. That is one important element that is seldom placed in its larger contexts.

Many scattered essays and an awkward genre that some call "Quit-Lit" do not meet the urgent need for in-depth, systematic—both quantitative and qualitative—studies. Frank Donoghue's (2008) *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* presumes the plight of the humanities to be unique and depends on undefined buzzwords. Leonard Cassuto's (2015) *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix* is out of touch with higher education, disciplinary, and political economic realities. The humanities are an aggravated but not unique case, in fair measure a consequence of our own actions and especially inactions. The social and natural sciences share most of the problems of the last half century, but each disciplinary cluster remains isolated from the others.

None of the overflowing but underwhelming book series on higher education—from Johns Hopkins University Press, Cornell University Press, West Virginia University Press, Bloomsbury, Lexington/Rowman, and Littlefield—include original studies of these issues.

In this essay, I first point to patterns of change *and* continuity in higher education past *and* present. That is absolutely necessary for any consideration of reactions and actions now. "Poverty in academia" is an age-old pattern and problem that shifts over time and types of institutions. We forget, for example, that both the Morrill Act of 1862 and the post-World War II GI Bill were anti-poverty *and* economic development efforts but almost exclusively for white men.

I then reframe the history of higher education by taking a critical eye to commonly repeated myths or at best partial truths about the conflicting and contradictory promises, practices, and

results of higher education, especially with respect to labor and poverty. I conclude with a consideration of the incalculable costs and consequences.

A Required First Course

Consider images and myths.[2] The foundations of Western universities in medieval times and their growth in early modern Europe are inextricably associated with poverty-stricken "scholars," from Paris to Rome, Florence, Madrid, Oxbridge, and elsewhere. The religious elements of university foundations are underscored, but many early students sought administrative careers. Over the *longue durée* of colleges, the poverty of many students and both ministerial and part-time faculty was foundational. *Conceptions of scholars and paupers were inseparable* (see, for example, Grendler, 2002; LaVolpa, 1988; McClelland, 1980).

When Atlantic-coast British immigrants and their descendants imported English and Scottish higher education to the American colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, that pattern transferred, too, from Harvard, William and Mary, Princeton, Penn, and Columbia to early public universities like Virginia. Among our lore is the image of Mark Hopkins, president of Williams College, trained as a lawyer, philosophizing on "one end of a log" to a humble, poor undergraduate at the other end.

Parenthetically, when young women were allowed to enroll in Oberlin in the 1830s, they were required to wash the male students' clothing—*without pay*—one day each week. Women's uncompensated "work" was part of co-education.

Of course, there were very few racial, ethnic, or religious "minority" students in the "age of the democratic liberal arts colleges." Far more Black slaves labored in both private and public higher education before and after the Civil War than attended colleges until the twentieth century. They were poor and impoverished, their presence only recently and partly acknowledged (see, for example, Wilder, 2013; Cohen, 2012).

These were not yet the colleges of the wealthy, merchants, industrialists, professionals, rising middle class, or the "exceptionally talented few." Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century institutions of higher education were "the engines of mobility" or the "basis of democratic opportunity" only for a relatively small number, overwhelmingly white and male.

The self-deluding myths of a "golden age of the liberal arts college" and "great books" propagated by generations of university presidents and amplified in particular by English and humanities professors obscure the basic fact that undergraduate education has almost always been vocational. This ranged from training clergy, then lawyers and teachers, to the vocational Morrill Land Grant Act's over-riding emphasis on agriculture, mining, and manufacturing. Pre-professional and professional "training" have long histories.

Since at least the mid-nineteenth-century, universities have been tied *and* self-promotingly tied themselves to *ideals and myths* of both democracy and individual social mobility. The inherent contradictions are insufficiently noted. The dangers of overpromising and overselling

[2] On historical myth, see Graff (2008, 2015a, 2022q, 2022r, 2022u, 2022x, 2023d, 2023o, 2023p, 2023x, 2023z, in progress a).

rank high among colleges' and universities' contradictions. We periodically reap the consequences of "Slogan U" but perhaps never as dramatically as in the last decade.[3]

These foundations changed irregularly and inconsistently throughout the twentieth century. With the partial exception of some land-grant public universities, and some progressive and religious schools, mainline higher education became more exclusive and elitist especially until the post-World War II period.

These issues are not well represented in histories of education. I refer interested readers to David F. Allmendinger, Jr.'s (1975) *Paupers and Scholars: The Transformation of Student Life in Nineteenth-Century New England* and the best single-volume history of American higher education, Paul Mattingly's (2017) *American Academic Cultures: A History of Higher Education*. Contrast Allmendinger, Jr.'s work with that of W. Bruce Leslie (1992), *Gentlemen and Scholars: College and Community in the "Age of the University," 1965-1917*, with its ideological, under-researched mythmaking.

To address some of these questions, I wrote *Reconstructing the New "Uni-versity" from the Ashes of the "Multi- and Mega-versity"* and editing a collection of original first-person essays, *Changing Paths of Academic Lives: Revising How We Understand Higher Education/Universities, 1960s to 2020s and Beyond*.

Ignored by most recent critics of higher education, Thorstein Veblen's (2015) classic *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Businessmen* remains very important and relevant. With far too little attention to political economy, costs of living, extent of poverty among other forms of student, staff, and instructor strains of insecurities, historians of higher education—and today's writers—continue to emphasize the "age of 'emergence' of 'the modern university.'" Compare, for example, Laurence R. Veysey's (1965) *The Emergence of the American University* and his own seldom noticed revisionist (1981) "Book Re-View"; Compare Julie A. Reuben's (1996) *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* and the ahistorical Jonathan R. Cole's (2009) *The Great American University: Its Rise to Prominence, Its Indispensable National Role, Why It Must Be Protected.* The many repetitive but frequently cited books by Clark Kerr, Ernest Boyer, and Derek Bok ignore these issues, as well.

Precedents to the Present and Persistent Problems

"The making of the modern university," among its major taglines, is a maze of many myths. Let me be clear. By "myth" I do not mean complete falsehood or lie but at best a partial truth. Myths do not propagate and attract support without a degree of apparent accord with some people's sense of reality.

The early "age(s) of opportunity" for higher education were also the great eras of segregation, exclusion, and selective elitism. Uninformed recent and current debates about affirmative action and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) do not understand how recently quotas and then their persisting less formal transformations—Black, Jewish, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, women, transgender, other racial and ethnic, and geographic—were largely if never

[3] See References for my essays on slogans and sloganeering in higher education. See also Graff (in progress a).

completely removed. They seldom confront the fundamentally ideological and often self-interested or even prejudicial they remain.[4]

In the lexicon of democratic liberalism, to understand universities, labor, and poverty, we also need to probe concepts, myths, and the actual operations of old and newer forms of market economies and job markets. The *job market*—an inappropriate term of both classical and neo-liberal economic "theories" applied to academic labor, which has never been an ideal or even functional "free-labor market"—has rarely been strong since the historically unrepresentative post-World War II spurts of uneven and unsustained expansion.

Among an overwhelming literature on higher education, I suggest beginning with the relevant works of geographer and political economist David Harvey and economist and historian Thomas Piketty. How little the topics appear in the contemporary scholarly promotion of public-funded public and private university expansion. Is it surprising or contradictory how little the full shelf of books on "universities in the marketplace" addresses either labor or poverty?[5]

Universities never functioned for all as a free, open, or equitable "market." What I, as a historian, call the "myth of decline" is omnipresent among writers from both right and left about post-World War II universities.

Insufficiently appreciated and studied are the roles of federal, state, and local direct and indirect funding and support, first in the expansion of colleges and universities and second in employment opportunities, the reduction of student indebtedness and poverty, and the lessening the "opportunity costs"—to appropriate another curious (and contradictory) term—of graduate studies and entry-level, full-time tenure-track positions. In the US context, this is more the exception than the norm over the long term.

The "ages of expansion" for higher education were all defined by relatively massive government expenditures beginning with the founding of state universities with the 1862 segregationist and vocational Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 and new public universities founded on land illegally appropriated from Indigenous Peoples. Expansion continued with non-central elements of the segregationist public welfare and economic development Work Projects Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression and rose to new heights with the segregationist and, in-practice, sexist GI Bill following the end of World War II. Many very likely unemployable veterans chose to enroll in post-secondary schooling. The emergency, "temporary" housing that many universities built for them is an instructive example as are work-study programs.

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[4] The major historical exceptions to these generalizations included Progressive Era University of Wisconsin, the parts and the whole of City University of New York (CUNY), and The New School, especially for refugees from eastern Europe and then old and new leftists. To begin, see Hoeveler (2016), Edel (1990), Traub (1994), and Rutkoff and Scott (1986). We need more encompassing critical histories of CUNY, its parts and the whole, and the contradictions of The New School, past and present.

[5] Harvey's and Piketty's works are too many to list. In contrast, see Clark Kerr's many books, including *The Uses of the University* (1963) and *The Great Transformation in Higher Education, 1960-1980* (1991). Compare with Christopher Jencks and David Riesman's (1969) work. See also Bok (2003), Washburn (2005), Smith (2004), Richard S. Ruch, (2001), and Stein, ed., (2004). Little different are the self-styled left or progressive critics like Fabricant and Brier (2016), Newfield (2008), and Bunch (2022).

"Expansion" and both the explicit and implicit promise of individual mobility are most commonly associated with the sporadic, uneven flow and ebb of public higher education—and the private responses and the overlaps—since the 1950s. As commonly perceived, this was not a single wave. Public and private wealth periodically flowed into both public and private institutions. Along with notions of "markets," we cannot simply oppose or dichotomize abstract notions of "public" and "private," nor can we directly correlate an individualistic ideology of upward movement through education with the actual lives of those not attending college, "dropouts," "flunk-outs" (note the rhetoric again), or "successful graduates" at Bachelors, Masters, PhD, or professional-degree levels.

Academic labor and poverty cannot be separated from public—as well as private—funding opportunities. This is often a matter of timing, chance, and individual variation.

Internationally, the United States is an outlier, an "exception" as in so much else. Especially but not only in the West, the modern expansion of higher education was also first associated with the emergence of public institutions in the nineteenth century. Most dramatically and significantly, beginning in the 1930s but increasing substantially from the 1960s, higher education was central to the flows and ebbs of the welfare state in its varying, inconsistent forms. Private and public, individual and collective are less often opposed. Although never a perfect set of relationships, there is typically less opposition between the individual and the collective. Consequently, student poverty and opportunities have been less apparent until recently. They need to be understood through the opaque lens of "social safety nets."

An Illustrative/Not Unrepresentative Account from the 1960s-1970s

When I entered Northwestern University in 1967, it had only recently dropped a range of racial, religious, and ethnic quotas. In so doing, it increased its scholarships and loans and recruited nationally for the first time. My professors almost unanimously spoke about great changes, largely if not yet completely for the better.[6]

At the same time, there were many poor—however defined or measured—students. My own middle-class family had little to spend on my higher education. I paid primarily with university and state scholarships and state loans and summer pay as a union laborer in my native Pittsburgh's declining steel mills and public parks. I learned life-long lessons in those non-classrooms from sometimes amazingly wise instructors who had not graduated from high school.

From a lower middle-class family, my future wife received scholarships, took out loans, and held work-study positions year-round. That was the only way she could afford to attend a selective—in fact, any—university. I paid for her first eye examination out of my tiny monthly allowance. When tuition rose from $600 to $800/quarter or $2,400/year in 1969, the student body screamed bloody murder.

Many of the graduate teaching and research assistants of the 1960s held more than one university job. My dormitory counselors were all full-time graduate students across the

[6] For my experiences, see Graff (2024j, 2022i, 2022m, 2022r, 2022u, 2022v, 2202z,
2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f, 2023h. 2023q, 2023u, 2023x, 2023z. 2024f, 2024g, 2024h, 2024i).

disciplines. They supplemented fellowships and either or both teaching and research assistantships with that work.

At Ohio State University, where I ended my full-time teaching career, and at other institutions, now college juniors and seniors (and occasionally sophomores) mainly with room-and-board compensation (but no additional stipend) replace graduate students as inadequate supervisors of fellow undergraduates only a year or two younger. Universities save money while students suffer socially and materially. Poverty and impoverishment are inextricably interrelated.

In the late 1960s, teaching assistants—all graduate students—were not paid well, but the degree of abuse pales in comparison to the 1980s and especially the 2000s. Although there are no systematic data, those with whom I speak agree that assistants had lower numbers of teaching sections and closer supervision. Their efforts were better coordinated. Support of students and quality of instruction are inextricably interrelated.

In a rare but transformative example, at least one exceptional case was not paid in cash but in course credits. In the third quarter of my junior year, all of my undergraduate advisor's doctoral students were in the United Kingdom doing dissertation research. He turned to me, inviting me to teach two discussion sections of his British history course. Unable to use university funds, he instead gave me credit for two full courses: one to teach, the second to do extra reading and meet with him weekly to discuss each class session. This was a major step on my uncertain but successful path to becoming a professor.

My future wife and I each graduated with student loan debts. Deferred until I completed my PhD degree in 1975, I repaid the bank that allocated State of Pennsylvania higher education loans $15/month over several years. Of course, our $3000 debts do not compare to the 1990s and 2000s levels of tens and hundreds of thousands of dollars. But in the 1960s and 1970s, we were "poor" undergraduate and graduate students, living on fellowships, assistantships, and part-time jobs around the year.

For context and comparison, in the first half of the 1970s, we paid between $120 and $150 for rent each month and $10 each week for food at the grocery store. A celebratory meal at a French restaurant with wine cost $25 for two. My $2500 plus tuition Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and my wife's University of Toronto $500 bursary and part-time hourly work supported us for our first year.

We benefitted enormously by moving in 1970 to Canada and the University of Toronto where tuition was $500/year and even as landed immigrants (not resident aliens, as in the United States) we had free health care for five years. No US universities or states provided such foundational social supports, especially for young unemployed or under-employed students.[7]

After a first year on fellowship, I spent the next four on varying combinations of university and national Canadian graduate fellowships, academic year and summer research assistantships, and an extramural teaching fellowship. My graduate department had no undergraduates and therefore no traditional teaching assistants. In my final year, I was hired to

[7] See Desmond (2023) on "American exceptionalism." US higher education can only be understood in a comparative perspective. The place of international students demands much more careful study. It is revealingly rare.

teach one graduate seminar in my area of expertise, a superb learning experience. I have not heard of another such opportunity.

With a nod to "American exceptionalism," in the summer of 1973, after participating in the Newberry Library Institute in Social, Demographic, and Family History, supported by grants from the Spencer and Mellon Foundation, I taught a graduate summer school course at Northwestern University. That opportunity stemmed from a collegial relationship between my graduate advisor and his colleague at Northwestern. These exceptions cannot be institutionalized. They do suggest opportunities and alternative possibilities.

There Were No "Good Old Days"

My first full-time position was tenure-track, along with more than 120 other new or recent PhDs in 1975. This exceptional group's early careers began at the brand-new, expansionist, and falsely promoted "interdisciplinary" branch of the University of Texas at (actually near) Dallas (UT-Dallas). There were also adjuncts, all year to year, including, in the offensive phrase, "trailing spouses," some male, more female. My starting salary was $13,000 for the nine-month academic year. Most faculty couples were two earners with many beginning or waiting to begin families. There was no university daycare or paid family leave.

These were not poverty wages but they were not comfortable wages either, especially with the combined weights of student-loan payments and job insecurity until tenure.

Few of us were aware that a tenure-track assistant professor in a Texas public university could be terminated without full review before the end of the third year. Third and fifth year "full reviews" constituted what we came to call "the great massacre" of the untenured. Exceptional assistant professors were terminated. Some left for other careers. Both common patterns demand study (see Graff, in progress b).

Yet, confronting the worse tenure-track job market in history up to that point, UT-Dallas was a plum position. One Princeton PhD, political economist occasionally quipped, "Aren't we all someone famous's best student?" He was at least partly correct. That was no guarantee of job security, then as now (see Graff, 2023e).

More than 40 years later, I completed my career as Professor of English and History, and inaugural Ohio Eminent Scholar in Literacy Studies at the almost 150-year-old, land-grant Ohio State University, 2004-2017. I achieved security while students—graduate and undergraduate—the ever-present non-tenured—of a confusing and confused variety of appointments—and many tenure-track assistant professors did not.

Almost all of my own doctoral students in several disciplines across the arts, humanities, and education who desired tenure-track positions achieved them, and then tenure, but not always at first. Some moved from one university position to another, more appropriate one. One student chose to remain in a primary and secondary school associated with a major university. Another chose wisely to leave a tenured position to return to teaching literature at an elite private secondary school. One extremely talented student left her academic profession because of a near complete absence of jobs in her field.

A significant handful chose, wisely for themselves, not to seek full-time academic positions. In some cases, this decision involved considerations for factors such as family location, partner or spouse's job, and a growing family. All my students nurtured worthwhile, satisfying, and successful careers. In each case, they successfully translated their studies into successful work. In this, they parallel some of my 1970s graduate-school peers who chose not

to complete doctoral degrees, and some of my founding UT-Dallas colleagues who were either denied tenure or opted out of academia after close examination of its strengths, limitations, and opportunities.

There are many lessons in their life paths. On the one hand, the crises of the present are not without precedent. On the other hand, as my own successful career confirms, professional and material forms of security and scholarly achievement are not always consistently synonymous or accompanied by fair or equitable professional or personal treatment, psychological comfort, and associated elements of "academic success."[8]

Approaching the Present

The present can only be understood in historical context. If not unprecedented, the problems including poverty *and* impoverishment among graduate and undergraduate students, non-tenure-track contractual and adjunct faculty, staff, and even some tenured faculty with special needs and large loan debts has grown significantly. Both poverty and impoverishment cross economic, political, social, and cultural boundaries.

This must also be comprehended in the context of the accelerating decline of higher education especially since the 1990s. By decline, I refer both to the inaction and failure to meet challenges of the historical moment by colleges and universities. And the related but very confused diminishing image and loss of faith in the economic value and personal and social worth of higher education.

Handwringing and whining, loudest among the humanities, help no one except, perhaps, the authors of unknowledgeable, self-serving essays that fill *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. If I may generalize boldly, with each succeeding week or month, most universities—large and small, public and private—seem more paralyzed and more distant from reality, and especially from their students, faculty, and staff whose needs are real and increasing (see Graff studies included in References).

Not the first such convergence of trends—as in recessions, depressions, and wartimes—the situation is made dramatically worse by the failure of universities in general and especially the refusal of the non-professional divisions (that is, fields outside engineering, computer science, business, and the applied sciences) to respond meaningfully and responsibly to changing social, economic, and indeed their own campuses' currents.[9]

Poverty and low wages are persistent conditions in higher education for staff as well as students and some faculty. Full-time, continuing, and commensurate work *was never promised* to students and graduates at any level. The "privilege" of association with the proverbial Ivory Tower presumed to be a reward in itself, substituting or preplacing fair material compensation.

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[8] See Graff (2015a, 2015c, 2022c, 2022h, 2022i, 2022j, 2022n, 2022p, 2022q, 2022r, 2022v, 2022w, 2022x, 2022y, 2022z, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f, 2023h, 2023i, 2023k, 2023l, 2023q, 2023v, 2024b, 2024c, in progress b). Compare with the distancing and out-of-touch qualities of Cassuto (2015), Mary Burgan (2006), Furstenberg (2013), and Semenza (2006). The latter is by an assistant professor; he includes "fake" documents. Consider the book titles. Publishers see a market here; is that surprising?

[9] That, in large part, is the subject of my book in progress, *Reconstructing the New "Uni-versity" from the Ashes of the "Multi- and Mega-versity."* See also Graff (2023i), Knezevic and Graff (2023), and Levy and Graff (2023a, 2023b, 2024).

Over time as well as across campuses, opportunities, support systems, and costs of living—and expectations for the future—vary more than common perceptions allow. We lump when we need to split. Contrary to the usual discourse in the 2020s, their course is variable not linear. We must seek out the commonalities *and* the distinctions not only for time and place, but for undergraduate and graduate students; non-tenure-track part- and full-time, PhD-holding faculty; and early-career professors.

In these contradictions lay some of the *multiple meanings of poverty and impoverishment*. By *impoverishment*, I refer to the inseparable material, social, and physical consequences of poverty broadly defined. My conception embraces the complexly interconnected psychological, intellectual, and cultural consequences for the individuals and their close associates directly involved, but also for their broader array of fellow students and diverse publics.

To reiterate: *there was no golden age with which to compare the present*, as tempting–and as easy—as that is to most commentators. All too often, we have no systematic, longitudinal, or comparative data across public and private universities or student degree levels or different kinds of non-tenure-track teaching faculty. That is among the many reasons why the "problems" and the facts of student and adjunct poverty seem so recent and dramatic. Individual stories are often moving, sometimes powerful, but rarely representative.

Despite that, almost all matters have worsened. That is inescapable. But it must be understood more carefully and in context.

Toward A New Beginning

First, the oversold promise of higher education has run its conflict- and contradiction-ridden course after more than a century and a half of flows and ebbs. Institutions take credit for individuals' success while the unsuccessful are held responsible for their own failure. That is the American Way: one's bootstraps are for sale by the campus.

But today the myth of "promise for all" through higher education but achievement *for some* has run its course. Therein lies the often repeated notion of a popular loss of faith or confidence in the value of college—from the price of tuition (and often hidden fees) to applicants, enrollees, attendance, and degrees conferred. And, of course, implicitly promised but never guaranteed employment is part of the poor bargain. A concern for future employability is what is new to the moment with higher education as a significant source of both poverty and impoverishment individually and collectively, accompanied by declining levels of support for students.

Ideologues on the right misleadingly relate this concern to the suppression of free speech, wokeness, and unchecked liberal and left [sic] professors. In fact, state and private suppression of genuine free speech—including in classrooms—is led by the radical right-wing especially in Florida, Texas, Georgia, Arkansas, and Indiana, and imitated in states like my current home state of Ohio. This suppression, indeed, is a far greater threat to the never firmly established promises of academic free speech for students, staff, and teachers.

On the left, professors who do not know their history or theory point to, without defining, "neo-liberalism," "the corporate university," and the "market-place university." These concepts tell us almost nothing.

Despite the illusions of the impact of the common application, multiple forms of early admissions, “guaranteed” loans, and counterfeit high school college credit courses on increasing access, applications and enrollments decline. Student aid in the form of scholarships, loans, and work study never correlate closely with shifting student numbers or needs. Student aid also declines as a consequence of changing internal and external currents, especially in the so-called but incomplete “public sphere.”

We regularly read about the hidden and exceedingly fine print that misleads students and their families about conditions of admissions, fees in addition to tuition, minimum enrollment requirements for the acceptance of financial aid, and much more. Therein appear more causes for student poverty. Federal and state authorities respond tardily to all of these well-known problems of both omission and commission.

As a result, students’ course loads decrease while many work at least part-time, and the once four to five years for a BA/BS becomes six to eight or more years, if ever. Tuition does not decline proportionately. Significant flunk-out and dropout rates, especially in the STEM fields, are not reported. Students pressed from at least middle school by school counselors, parents, cultural forces, and widespread university policies that over-admit especially in engineering and business and under-admit not only in the humanities but also in the social and natural sciences flunk or drop out in unacknowledged, substantial numbers. Indeed, the numbers of humanities majors, in particular, by themselves are misleading (see Graff articles from 2021–2024).

As the uneven recovery from the pandemic and many universities’ poor responses and guidance continue, students short of expenses often accept the easily available but almost always underpaid and often unsafe part-time opportunities that surround them. Their universities do not step up to meet the needs of their ever-rising tuition paying “customers/consumers.” Housing and food prices, on and off campus, rise more quickly than scholarships and loans. Many students have no choice in order to meet their basic needs.

The former president of Ohio State in 2022 promoted her Scarlet and Gray Advantage Plan. Neither a free mileage or credit card program, this plan purported to establish debt-free graduation for all students *without reducing tuition and fees*, a logical and an arithmetic impossibility. With no development plan, funding, budget, or timetable, it covered 125 students of 7500 members of the class of 2026 in its inaugural year. Few students knew about it. With that president’s ordered resignation, it is all but forgotten.[10]

We also forget that unlike today, a BS in engineering was typically a 5-year program with one year of *paid* internships or co-ops. Lengthening times for completing degrees across fields, high rates of flunking and dropping out, and increasing student poverty—and intellectual/cultural impoverishment—interact inseparably, weighing heavily on all parties.

Second, the mid-to later twentieth century rise of enrollments and graduates was built on the partial truth or myth “that everyone needed a degree for a good job.” For several decades, that conception appeared to hold across most departments and majors. It served as “an independent variable,” substantially propelling unprecedented family “investment” in children’s education, and levels of both family and individual students’ loans. It also built upon

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[10] See Graff (2022b, 2022s, 2022t, 2022y, 2023a, 2023b, 2023r, 2023s, 2023t, 2023v, 2024d, 2024i).

"baby booms." This led directly to what is widely considered a crisis for millions of young and not so young people, who were lured into tens and hundreds of thousands of dollars of indebtedness. Poverty was all but a direct consequence of unregulated university pricing and loan granting, often illegally misleadingly. The Biden bailout plan is inadequate, falsely and illogically condemned as favoring those in most need of assistance and blocked by right-wing courts.

If we adopt the rhetoric and blinders of most economists, the market economies of universities, tuition, and student aid, on the one hand, and the loan economy and job markets on the other, the rise in student poverty and decline in valuation of higher education are all but the direct results of the American equation. Without either or both knowledgeable and responsible university and government response, how could it be otherwise?

Facing the specter—and the realities—of poverty in this context leads millions of undergraduate and graduate students to access the rising numbers of available jobs that do not require a degree or only a two-year degree or certification in computers or aspects of high-tech construction, for example. There are job opportunities that will diminish poverty, but they do not counteract intellectual impoverishment or declining support for educational institutions.

Despite its rhetorical endorsement of markets, higher education in general, and most disciplines and disciplinary clusters in particular, for decades failed to respond to changing conditions and changing students. To assert that the humanities and social sciences neglected to turn their/our so-often recited abilities toward understanding their/own circumstances is a powerful but inescapable indictment. It is one of the recent period's greatest intellectual contradictions.[11]

Third, we see these intersections and contradictions playing out at all levels, not only the most commonly recognized "plight" of PhD students and recent graduate students. The humanities capture the most attention, column inches, and bandwidth across the media. Yet the social sciences and much of the natural sciences share in the vicious cycles of changing perceptions of job markets, admissions policies, social and cultural distortions and misperceptions, unquestioned advantages of STEM, and programs and penalties to other programs in an unnecessary zero-sum game.

Unfortunately, "student interests" and "career aspirations" are not givens but manipulated socio-cultural products. Current widely repeated journalism, such as Nathan Heller's (2023) "The End of the English Major" and its tag-alongs in the *New York Times*, *Inside Higher Education,* and overflowing social media, is based on incomplete information, no historical perspective, and no questioning of assumptions. The English major has not ended nor do "Students Hate English." My undergraduate acquaintances in STEM and business readily attest "I miss reading." STEM students long for cross- or interdisciplinary courses on the history, philosophy, and literature of science and technology. Business students want economic history. Both want more basic communications education. They would prefer a broader, more integrated curriculum.[12]

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[11] On public scholarship and interdisciplinary, see Graff (2015a, 2021c, 2022a, 2022c, 2022d, 2022i, 2022l, 2022p, 2022q, 2022v, 2023f, 2023h, 2023x, 2024g).

[12.] Heller (2023) with follow-up work from Paul (2023), Douthat (2023), and Newman (2023). See, for example, Hayot (2021). He cannot distinguish between marketing and actual content.

Non-STEM faculty would like to teach such courses. Engineering and other professional schools will not relinquish or share the budget-driving enrollment credit hours.

University admission policies and budgeting procedures are powerful negative forces. They shape enrollments and the number of majors. Lack of cooperation—with no central leadership—across campuses leads to colleges of engineering and business obstructing their students' abilities to pursue useful and meaningful electives and minors.

So, too, are practices that set departments and colleges or schools directly against each other without moderation or mediation, let alone leadership. Why have not the humanities in particular looked around themselves/ourselves and adjusted to accommodate the breadth of student interests and perceptions of job markets? There are far too few joint or blended majors that cross significant campus lines, many of them intellectually unnecessary.

On the one hand, the non-STEM fields adapt too little. Voices in that wilderness are few but powerful when aired. On the other hand, colleges of engineering use inflexible university budget models to amass all the enrollments, credit hours, and resources that they can. Their universities take no responsibility for maintaining or sustaining the health of the *uni*-verity as a whole in the face of the multi-versity.

As a result, everyone is intellectually and culturally impoverished while the highest levels of material poverty come to undergraduates, graduate students outside STEM, and non-tenure-track instructors, many of them part-time employees without benefits or job security.

Fourth, at the graduate level, the problems are especially acute although rarely understood in historical or meaningful contexts. On one hand, there is the too familiar but continuing (rather than unprecedented) dearth of tenure-track jobs across the arts and sciences. As I argue, history shows that this is recurrent, not novel, and to an extent at least in part predictable.

The limits of serious discussion, proposals, and debates, for example, in the two disciplines I know best, history and English, speak for themselves. Lamentation—whining, crying along the lines of "nobody loves us anymore" but unable to state specifically when they did—mark recent published commentaries. One young scholar who writes that she never planned to pursue doctoral studies, publishes (in poor prose), "I Love Higher Education. It Isn't Loving Me Back" (Leffingwell, 2022). With all due respect, I must ask: who specifically do you expect "to love you back?" How? Why?

Of course, she may be misled by tenured professors at Stanford and Princeton, who either ignore employment issues or propose graduate program reforms unaware that their own institution attempted but ended the same changes more than forty years ago. Should anyone be surprised that a doctoral student at Johns Hopkins expects but not surprisingly does not find serious discussion of the employment crisis at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association?[13]

Far too many intending and continuing graduate students are not advised adequately and responsibly. As a college senior in 1969-1970, I was forewarned, as I was throughout my graduate studies from 1970-1975, about both problems and possibilities of completing the

[13] See Bruggeman (2023). See also Labaree (2023) and Bell (2023). Compare with Leffingwell (2022, 2023)3.

doctorate. I changed major fields of concentration partly as a result of learning the shifting landscape of opportunity.

I was advised to and assisted in preparing myself broadly for the most likely set of possibilities. My major advisors at that time had themselves experienced the job crises of the early to mid-1960s, including the persisting barriers faced by women scholars. They shared their experiences. They led me through conference participation, proposal writing, and publishing articles—and professional modeling and socialization—as part of my training, to use at best an only partially appropriate word, as part of the unwritten or shadow curriculum. For better or worse, they taught me to be and to expect professionalism and collegiality. None of that is part of twenty-first-century currency (see Graff, 2023q, 2024j).

That is a set of patterns about which I seldom hear in the twenty-first century and especially the last decade. Moreover, these patterns exacerbate material poverty and the impoverishment of graduate studies and are transferred to undergraduates especially by graduate-student instructors who replace (to a substantial extent) new ranks of assistant professors at far lower salaries and far lower costs to departments and universities. Overworked, underpaid, and easily expendable, graduate-student instructors take longer to complete their degrees if they in fact do, adding to depressed conditions.

Fifth, in this world of higher education, student instructors—with the awkward title of TA or teaching assistant despite often conducting their own classes—join the expanded and expanding ranks of the non-tenure track, which also include sessional or visiting faculty, contractual or non-contractual faculty, full- or part-time lecturers, adjunct assistant professors, and others. Consider these bewildering and misleading titles, all suggesting their insecurity, impermanence, and precarity. Uncertain wages and variable benefits are clear routes to poverty.

This is the major transformation of the teaching "corps" since the creation of the once novel untenured assistant, (usually but not always) tenured associate, and tenured full professor in the first half of the twentieth century.[14]

Truth and Consequences: The World We Have Wrought, Not the World We Have Lost

It is too soon to access fully the larger intellectual or educational, cultural, and political consequences. They are too many to enumerate but they constitute a powerful set of paths to both forms of poverty and broader forms of impoverishment. The lack of basic historical and civic knowledge, critical reading and writing abilities, and logic permeates our political culture. Multiple declines in higher education stand among the many reasons.

Consider a roster from which to advance discussion and prompt investigation. We know far too little about the direct and indirect causes—long and short term—and consequences. With less than two decades as our usual baseline, we cannot grapple seriously with either short- or long-term trends, effects, and possible responses.

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[14] I recall my anti-intellectual father-in-law's bewilderment in 1975 when his son-in-law received his doctorate and became an assistant professor. He asked, why did I study for so many years only to become an assistant to a professor. As in so many ways, academia is often its own worst enemy. See, for example, Graff (forthcoming).

Failure to begin that process all but guarantees continuation and likely exacerbation of the popular and political turns against higher education and education more generally. The dangers of poverty and impoverishment rise and ripple down through public and private educational systems.

As both direct and indirect consequences, twenty-first-century anti-intellectualism and right-wing authoritarianism in general undermine popular understanding of free speech and other Constitutional rights, voting rights, privacy rights, inclusive accurate history, public education, book banning, among much else. This list also includes international and global issues, such as fundamental rights for all (including women and children), poverty, peace, climate change and environmental concerns, and disease and pandemics.[15]

The recent rise in poverty in higher education is inseparably and complexly associated with cultural and political impoverishment. Others may focus on the present and possible futures. In conclusion, however, I underscore the combined contradictions and silences of the principal groups in higher education when it comes to poverty and impoverishment, separately and together. In order, I identify elected officials at the national and state levels; university presidents, provosts, and heads of student life and student affairs; faculty groups on campuses; and national organizations—from the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) to more specialized scholarly organizations.[16]

On the national and state level, support for expanding student loans and a degree of oversight is contradicted by many officials' (including Democrats) opposition to government paybacks and cancellations of loans. The fallacious arguments about unfair favoritism are illogical, undemocratic, and anti-social. Similarly, oversight of loans, tuition and fees, and scholarships/fellowships is insufficient. The current FAFSA failure is only one case in point.

Few campus leaders address these issues or make developed proposals. They do not understand how silence and inaction undermine their mission-related sloganeering. The powerful realm of marketing and communication ("marcomm," as it identifies itself) has not yet seen sufficient "return on investment" in the sectors of poverty and impoverishment.

What I see as an unwillingness for faculty to cooperate and coordinate on curricular and other issues appears here, too. Despite too rare discussions about falling numbers of graduate students and the lack of jobs for many students (not only doctoral graduates), the lack of regular attention and proposals to address poverty by campus faculty groups, professional scholarly organizations, and the AAUP is damning.

In retirement, I note how few faculty and both graduate students and undergraduates are organized, let alone unionized in 2024. I note how little cooperation—educational as well as political—takes place among organized groups on campuses. We see this especially in California now.

Any call to action, in my view, must begin with communication, cooperation, and collaboration on campuses, across different universities, and with both officials and diverse publics. Can academia turn to genuinely broad education? Dare we not attempt to do that?

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[15] To follow these lines, see, for example, Graff (2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022a, 2022d, 2022g, 2022i, 2022l, 2022q, 2022v, 2023f, 2023g, 2023j, 2023m, 2023n, 2023u, 2023x,2023z, 2024f, 2024g, 2024i).

[16] I note that I resigned from both the AAUP and the American Historical Association in 2023 as a result of unprofessional conduct on their staffs' part. Both refunded my membership fees.

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The Culture of Poverty in the Ivory Tower

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We, the authors of this piece, are both contingent faculty who primarily teach first-year writing. Alex is an adjunct at a two-year college, and Bethany is a PhD student at a nearby public R1 university.

Allow us to present you with two documents that outline the labor conditions of contingent workers in our field: the Writing Program Administration Graduate Organization (WPA-GO) statement on graduate student workers and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) report on quality of life for adjuncts. Both documents, released in 2019 and 2020, respectively, present data gathered from surveying contingent faculty. The WPA-GO statement surveyed 344 graduate students in writing programs across the United States and found their self-reported working conditions to be bleak. Among the upsetting statistics were the following: 62.8% of them worked more hours than contracted each week, their median pay ranged from $11,000 for MA/MS students to $16,800 for PhD students, 71.8% said their pay was insufficient to cover their living costs, and 36% said their health insurance coverage was insufficient ("Report on Graduate Student Instructor Labor Conditions" 1-3). The AFT report gathered responses from 3,076 adjuncts from two- and four-year institutions, and their findings were arguably worse. Below is a list of disturbing findings directly from the executive summary of the report. I encourage you to read them closely and sit with the implications these facts have on the lives of those who reported them.

- One-third of respondents earn less than $25,000 annually, placing them below the federal poverty guideline for a family of four.
- Only 15% report being able to comfortably cover basic monthly expenses.

- Fewer than half of the survey respondents have access to employer-provided health insurance; nearly 20% rely on Medicaid.
- About 45% of faculty members surveyed have put off getting needed healthcare, including mental healthcare; 65% forgo dental care.
- 41% struggle with job security, reporting that they don't know if they will have a teaching job until one month before the beginning of the academic year.
- For 3 out of 4 contingent faculty, employment is only guaranteed from term to term.
- A plan for a secure retirement is out of reach for most faculty, with 37% reporting they don't see a path ("An Army of Temps" 1).

To speak more specifically to adjunct conditions in our field of writing studies, we'll add a third report: the White Papers put out by the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) in 2021, which gathered data from 1062 faculty respondents from two-year colleges across the country. This study had a mixture of tenure- and non-tenure-track respondents, but White Paper #9 addressed contingent labor in the two-year college specifically, and the results were predictably discouraging. The TYCA survey reports that adjuncts at two-year colleges in our field struggle with "job insecurity, differential treatment from chairs and deans, limited autonomy, lack of respect for their expertise from administrators or full-time faculty, employment at multiple institutions, a lack of resources required for doing their jobs, and a lack of opportunity or time to pursue professional development and research in the field" (Giordano et al. 4). In addition to these structural and cultural issues, they are also poorly compensated.

Regardless of institution type or local context, higher education is built on the exploitation and suffering of contingent workers. In this article, we respond to these conditions not through large-scale surveying and data collection, as the authors of the reports cited above have done, but through autoethnography—what Rebecca L. Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney describe as "a subjective, emotional, and embodied view from the ground" (4). The truth is that neither of us can attempt to occupy the distant, pseudo-objective voice of the researcher when writing on academic labor. In our precarious positions within our institutions, we are too close to the action to describe academic labor systems without also speaking to our own local conditions, our own experiences, and our own feelings. The institutions we work within constrain our methods—to attempt a massive research study like those cited earlier in the introduction requires a kind of sustained institutional support that neither of us can access in our current positions. What is left to us, then, is the qualitative, self-focused, and context-conscious form of autoethnography (Jackson and Grutsch McKinney 7).

Though autoethnography is a form adopted in part due to our own contingency, it is also a form with close ties to the ongoing scholarly conversations around poverty and labor conditions in the academy. While Michael Dubson does not introduce any of the essays in his 2001 edited collection *Ghosts in the Classroom: Stories of College Adjunct Faculty—and the Price We All Pay* as autoethnography, many of the authors included seem to borrow from this form, narrating personal experiences of precarious teaching to suggest broader conclusions about the nature of adjunct work—and the academic systems that rely on it. More recently, in *Materiality and Writing Studies: Aligning Labor, Scholarship, and Teaching*, Holly Hassel and

Cassandra Phillips weave short sections of personal narrative into their evidence-based arguments about the state of the discipline, suggesting that just as field-wide surveys and reports can reveal something essential about the nature of our work, so, too, can personal stories.

Alongside our interest in autoethnography, we also draw on institutional ethnography (IE), a methodology about which Michelle LaFrance writes,

> [Institutional ethnography] holds that individual experience, ideals of practice, local materialities, and institutional discourse are mutually constitutive; what individuals do is always rule-governed and textually mediated. Using IE to study the "work" that people carry out allows writing studies researchers to reveal the deep and often hidden investments and experiences of those people, making visible the values, practices, beliefs, and belongings that circulate below more visible or dominant discourses. The researcher might then uncover opportunities for recognition, conversation, or intervention. (5)

As early career scholars, we are learning the field at the same time as we learn our respective institutions, and this process of enculturation reveals that poverty in academia functions not simply as a personal or institutional material reality but also as a cultural idea, sustained both by the institution and by those working within it. As LaFrance writes, this institutional framework "shifts the ethnographer's eye away from reified or static understandings of the people, events, or sites studied. The methodology asks us instead to investigate how the individuals within a location co-create the dynamics and processes under investigation" (5). It is this cocreation of a *culture of poverty* that we are most interested in—the ways that individuals within institutions of higher education sustain beliefs and practices that cement poverty as central to individual and institutional identity within the academy, limiting our collective imagination for more just and equitable systems and interventions.

The idea of a culture of poverty in academia builds on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, which he defines as the "'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" (Gramsci 12). However, even though he constructs the idea of cultural hegemony as the masses unconscious adaptation of the ways of thinking of those in power, Gramsci understands that "the outlook of subordinate groups is always divided and ambiguous," not entirely enticed by hegemony, but not entirely liberated from it either (Lears 570). This "contradictory consciousness" means the disempowered may at times protest systems that oppress them while simultaneously reinforcing them in other ways (Lears 570). bell hooks' *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* explores this phenomenon by analyzing the role women have in upholding patriarchy:

> Patriarchal thinking shapes the values of our culture. We are socialized into this system, females as well as males. Most of us learned patriarchal attitudes in our family of origin, and they were usually taught to us by our mothers. These attitudes were reinforced in schools and religious institutions. . . . We need to highlight the role women play in perpetuating and sustaining patriarchal culture so that we will recognize patriarchy as a system women and men support equally, even if men receive more rewards from that system. (41-42)

Those with more power in a given system are disincentivized from critiquing it, but even those with less power are enculturated to see its structure as normative, even if they

simultaneously recognize it as problematic. Once we understand hegemonic thinking, it's easy to see how it functions in higher education. We, the authors, have observed how the hegemonic culture of poverty is created and reinforced by administrators, full-time faculty, and contingent faculty alike. We see it in the way our departments talk about contingent workers, in the structures of support (or lack thereof) for them, and in the ways contingent faculty conceptualize their labor and limit their imaginations about what types of change are reasonable or possible.

The following sections, alternating between each of our perspectives, offer a braided narrative of our institutional encounters as contingent instructors, showcasing how institutional mechanisms incorporate new members into the culture of poverty in the academy. This dialogic format has a long history in pedagogical writing, stretching back at least as far as the Socratic dialogues in ancient Greece and connecting with Paulo Freire's "talking books" with Myles Horton and Ira Shor in the 1980s. Our version of this form is a written (rather than a spoken) dialogue and draws inspiration from Karen Powers-Stubbs and Jeff Sommers' "'Where We Are Is Who We Are': Location, Professional Identity, and the Two-Year College," an essay that similarly considers personal experience, institutional context, and identity in written dialogue. Following Powers-Stubbs and Sommers' example, we begin with brief descriptions of our institutional contexts which are followed by four alternating sections and a co-written conclusion.

Bethany

I am a PhD student at a large, public R1 in the Midwest. It's the second largest university in our state, with a student population of roughly 50,000. I teach and take classes on our main campus, but there are two branch campuses in the suburbs surrounding our city center. The university's student population is not representative of the neighborhood it inhabits–rather, most students come from across the region or surrounding states.

Alex

I currently teach at a public, urban, open-access two-year college in the Midwest. Founded in a former high school building in 1969, the institution started as a technical college before introducing community college programs in the 1990s. The college now offers 130 degree and certificate programs and enrolls more than 10,000 students annually. Like most two-year colleges, its students mostly come from the immediate geographic area, and the school enrolls high numbers of nontraditional students and Pell Grant recipients.

Bethany

Last semester, I received an email from the Graduate Program Director in my department titled "Goods and Groceries Available in the Lounge-Please come and grab some things!" She sent the email to a listserv of all the graduate students in our department. The rest of the email read:

> Hi All,

> There are groceries in the faculty lounge (dry goods on the table, meat in the freezer, eggs and garlic bread, lettuce, and some other produce in the fridge) that are up for grabs. There are also some personal products (soap, laundry detergent, toothpaste).
>
> I have forms in the office that people can complete- if four forms are completed, we can regularly have this delivery of food to the department for graduate students.
>
> Everything in the fridge that is available is labeled. Everything in the freezer is up for grabs.
>
> Please take what you need!

I've been thinking about this email for weeks. It bothered me when I read it, but not because I think the person who sent it did anything wrong–in fact, I believe the opposite. They facilitated the donation of food and toiletries to a group that often struggles with food insecurity. That's a valuable effort. However, when that email popped up on my phone, I was horrified. It felt dystopian that my department, instead of paying us more, started a food kitchen for us in the faculty lounge.

Throughout the rest of the semester, I received more emails about this effort as different faculty and staff members sourced new donations. Every time I walked into the English department faculty lounge to fill up my water bottle, I would see the pile of groceries sitting on the table, with more waiting in the fridge. One day, there was a pile of fliers about how to apply for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits. I took groceries from these supplies on multiple occasions, but my deep discomfort with the situation remained. I have struggled with how to articulate this discomfort because I know the people facilitating the distribution of the food, and I know them to be kind and understanding of graduate students' situations. I appreciate the resource and have made use of it. But the reality is that I'm being taken advantage of by the university, and I feel like the people who see it happening and sympathize with graduate students' struggles are creating systems around our poverty rather than railing at the powers that be who are exploiting us. The problem is that graduate students in my department aren't paid enough, and instead of fixing the dam of that injustice, sympathetic faculty are plugging the holes with their fingers.

I'm uncomfortable with my feelings of resentment. I know that the people running the food pantry don't have real power to change our pay, and they are also some of the people working most directly with graduate students, who see the problem and want to do anything they can to help. I feel deeply guilty about criticizing their efforts, especially because I benefit from them and they come from a good place. The box of off-brand Cheerios is sitting in my pantry right now, and I'm using them to help feed my two-year-old son. Regardless, the fact remains that academic culture has understood, accepted, and reinforced the poverty of graduate students, so much so that no one bats an eye at our department creating a food bank for us across the hall from their offices. So I'm left with this feeling of, *this is weird, right? Can everyone else see this is weird, or is it just me?* If graduate student poverty is so bad that we need food assistance and SNAP benefits, then shouldn't everyone in the department be protesting? Striking? Throwing a fit? Instead, I hear a lot of "it's a damn shame," and "here's a can of green beans."

Alex

Poverty came up almost immediately in my job interview for an adjunct position at a local two-year college. I had just finished an MA in Creative Writing and was desperate to find work as a writing teacher so I could stop picking up shifts at a local coffee shop to supplement my meager income from adjunct teaching at my alma mater. When this college advertised for a part-time instructor in their English Composition program, I applied immediately. In the interview, the department chair told me that the pay—40% less per credit hour than I was paid at the nearby university—was non-negotiable, but that the work itself was rewarding and the experience would be valuable for finding a full-time job. She also told me that the students at the open-access college were essentially the same as students I had taught at a large public R1, and that my teaching experience—at that point, just a handful of first-year writing courses—would be sufficient preparation for the job at hand. I left the interview with three sections of first-year writing for the coming term, Spring 2020.

In the four years since that interview, I've often wondered about the department chair's motivation for stressing that there was no difference between students at the community college and students at the university. My best guess is that it was a response to an unvoiced stereotype of community college students as inherently less smart, capable, or driven than university students—a perspective that the chair would understandably want to discourage, having spent her career working with brilliant and hard-working two-year college students. At the time, however, oblivious as I was to institutional differences, I took it at face value and planned a curriculum that closely mirrored my university courses, a decision that I soon came to regret as my students struggled to engage with the class in the ways I'd come to expect.

It was not, as the negative stereotypes might suggest, that my new students were incapable, unintelligent, or unmotivated. On the contrary, many of these students were more ambitious and driven than my traditional university students. They were starting small businesses, making career changes, setting examples for young children, and they wanted—desperately—to succeed. The differences came down to resources. Most of my community college students were poor. They could not afford laptops or home internet connections, so they relied on campus computer labs or public libraries to complete their work. They often worked full-time, sometimes multiple jobs, along with taking classes, so their time to complete readings and homework was severely limited. Some of them experienced housing or food instability during our semester together, and they were forced to make difficult choices about where to apply their too-little time and too-few resources, knowing that a choice to attend my class often meant turning down a shift, needing to find childcare, and other challenges.

My students' individual poverty, however, was compounded by institutional factors. Many came from under-resourced schools compared to my university students, and they described uneven past experiences with English courses, some claiming that they had never been asked to write an essay or had never received any detailed feedback from a teacher on a writing assignment. The community college itself was similarly under-resourced, a point emphasized by the outdated classrooms, broken furniture, and perennially understaffed academic departments and student- or instructor-support offices. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced all instruction online later in the term, each of these factors contributed to the difficulty of the transition as the institution, its instructors, and its students were all unprepared to navigate that

change. Stripped of these institutional and economic realities, my students might indeed be "no different than university students" (though demographic reporting would still suggest a distinct difference), but within the context of institutions—both the college and the students' previous educational institutions—the difference became stark.

In the job interview, I was also told unequivocally that little opportunity existed at the college to move beyond a part-time role—that the English department had not been allowed a new full-time hire in more than a decade—and that this situation was unlikely to change. While the college's billboards suggest that anyone might find their future there, this disclosure from my department chair, echoed in subsequent years by various other stakeholders at the college, seemed to suggest that there was no long-term future for me at the college. The issues of pay, advancement, and support have come up at various junctures during my time at the college, and every time, the veterans of the college—tenure-track or tenured faculty, administrators, and staff—are quick to point out their opposition to the conditions on the ground for adjuncts, but they often seem eager to move past the topic, to focus on the positive and skirt the discomfort. That our pay is embarrassingly low, that our departments are terminally understaffed, and that these conditions are the result of choices (not inevitabilities) made and tacitly supported by various stakeholders at the college—these are realities that are so obvious and unchangeable as to be not worth voicing. Department chairs and deans sigh and shake their heads as they describe the college's role as "training up adjuncts so they can leave and teach other places," meanwhile adjuncts hope, fervently, against the odds, that their ongoing exploitation might somehow lead to a full-time job at the college.

For many academics, these are not unfamiliar conditions. While there are isolated examples of new full-timers being plucked from the adjunct pool, these are often the exceptions that prove the rule: contingent workers are most likely to stay contingent. That some chairs at my college share this so plainly in the interview is probably better than some alternatives—one could easily imagine a college stringing adjuncts along with the promise of full-time jobs that are always *just* out of reach—but I also cannot help but wonder about the work involved in maintaining this institutional commonsense. What if every department chair, rather than patiently and repeatedly explaining to each adjunct the slim chances of attaining full-time status, instead used that time or energy to express to the upper administration the need for full-time faculty lines? What all of the hand-wringing, head-shaking, and empathy was instead directed toward advocacy through the Faculty Senate, the full-time faculty union, or other avenues?

None of this is to suggest that full-time faculty, department chairs, or even deans have the individual power to undo the insidious austerity of the neoliberal university—in most cases they do not. But they do play an important role in maintaining and sustaining the discourse that makes such conditions seem entrenched and inevitable, even when our institution's history tells us that overreliance on adjuncts and overwork for full-timers were not always the reality. By defining the institution to newcomers through these limitations, experienced actors in the community constrain our communal thinking not only about what our work currently looks like but also about how it could work in future. That adjuncts at my college end up dreaming of jobs elsewhere and, ultimately, leaving is not inevitable–it is a reality created in part by these constant reminders that they have no future within the college. That the resultant culture

of the college is a small cadre of full-time faculty, clinging to the protections of tenure and a union contract, and a much, much larger pool of transient adjuncts who leave as soon as a better option is presented is not an accident, then, but the logical result of an institutional culture designed both materially and ideologically to sustain precisely those conditions.

Bethany

I've been the president of the English Graduate Student Association (EGSA), our department's student government chapter, for two years now. At the end of last semester, I decided to run for president of Graduate Student Government (GSG), which is the central student government body that oversees each departmental chapter. Simultaneous to my student government involvement, I founded and am the president of an organized group of students from various departments and graduate programs working together to unionize graduate students at the university.

Because of these organizing efforts, the current executive board (the president, vice president, treasurer, and community outreach organizer) of GSG was noticeably antsy about me running for GSG president. The week before the election, the current president asked to meet with me, and when I logged into the Zoom meeting, he was there along with the VP and the election committee (the group of grad students in charge of facilitating the election). I wasn't sure what the meeting was about–I foolishly assumed that they were meeting with every candidate to explain how the election worked. That was not the case. They were meeting with me specifically to, in their words, discuss the "conflict of interest" between my labor organizing and my candidacy. The current president repeatedly assured me that they weren't asking me to drop out of the race (a strange thing to say, as I hadn't been considering it), but that he wanted to prepare me to answer the questions that the voting body would have for me on election day, when I was to give a speech and do a Q&A. The group questioned me on many fronts, warning me that I needed to decide where my loyalties lay: student government or union organizing. This baffled me because I thought the two were aligned in their values of improving the lives of graduate students on campus.

The president told me that administrators wouldn't be happy if I were elected, and that I could ruin the relationships he had built with them over his tenure as president. He warned that they might ignore my emails, impeach me from committees the GSG president was supposed to sit on, or even remove funding from GSG, which is the main source of conference travel funding for graduate students at our school. He told me he wished I would wait another year to run because there was an administrator working on a stipend increase initiative, and he worried that if I were elected the university would shut down that effort in retaliation. I started to get paranoid and angry at the administrators based on his warnings. How is it that my candidacy could be so controversial that the current president and the entire election committee needed to meet with me to warn me about this? It infuriated and energized me, and rather than scaring me away from running, it made me want to win more.

After the meeting, I immediately typed messages to the Discord and email list with fellow student-organizers, urging them to come to the election and support me and another student from our group who was running. I told them about the potential controversies the election

committee and current president warned me about and said that although they couldn't vote, they could lend their voices to the discussion before voting happened.

On the day of the election, it all went to hell. The executive board of GSG kicked out all non-voting members and held a 45-minute meeting where they put up a vote to disqualify me and the other candidate who was involved in labor organizing. They projected messages I and others had sent on the Discord and email list onto the screen in front of the voting body, saying that our calls to come out and show support were "election tampering." Essentially, we were accused of trying to mobilize an outside force to unduly sway the election. Most disturbingly, someone on GSG called campus police, and had an officer standing outside the meeting room and one standing at the back of the room while these events unfolded. In the end, we were not disqualified outright, but the meeting scared the voting body. I've been told that the GSG president reiterated in that private meeting some of the things he had told me: if we were elected, administrators would come for our funding, and it would start a huge fight. After I and the other labor-involved student gave our speeches, there was a vote of no confidence for both me and him, and we were removed from the pool of candidates before the final vote to elect a president.

I found out weeks later, through talking to various trusted administrators and other contacts, that none of the GSG president's warnings were based on real threats from university administrators. In fact, I have been told by many faculty and various folks in power that the deans and administrators at my university, on the whole, are open to conversations about pay and benefits for graduate students, and they are (at least anecdotally) more afraid of the legal complications of retaliating against union organizing than they are afraid of our movement. Essentially, the GSG president and election committee, a group of my fellow graduate students, were so consumed with fear of administrative backlash over labor organizing that they sabotaged our campaigns and called the cops on us. The fear over what *might* happen if administrators got mad had spread among the graduate student government body and poisoned the well against me and my fellow labor-conscious candidate.

Despite previous nominal support for my organizing efforts, the GSG executive board essentially communicated to me and my fellow candidate that there is a right and a wrong way to make change for graduate students within the official university structure. I realized, especially in talking to the GSG president, that they believed the function of GSG was to work within the system, not rock the boat, and try to make incremental improvements to stipends, healthcare, protections, or other graduate student concerns and conditions. When I, an organizer known among fellow graduate students for advocating for a union, tried to step into the student government space, I met harsh backlash. The message was clear: we don't make waves over here, and you're a wavemaker. Stay away. This is the culture of academic poverty reinforcing itself among the graduate student population. It tells us to stay appropriate, to keep university administrators comfortable, and to not use scary words like "union" where anyone can hear you.

Alex

Three years into my employment at the community college, after having taught more than twenty-five courses across nine consecutive terms, I responded to an email soliciting a

volunteer to serve as the adjunct faculty representative on the college's Faculty Senate. I was, by this time, teaching at four institutions, pursuing my PhD, working on the editorial team of an academic journal, and pursuing an ambitious research agenda—in short, I decidedly did not have time for a two-hour weekly meeting and a weekly barrage of emails, all with no additional pay. However, I had been vocal about my frustration with the pay and lack of resources at the college, and this seemed like an opportunity to finally get a seat at the table and advocate for better conditions for adjuncts. I sent an email expressing interest and was promptly invited to attend the next meeting.

My introduction to the Faculty Senate was a strange one. While I had assumed the positive response to my message and the invitation to the meeting was an indication that I was the new adjunct representative, I discovered upon arrival that there was another hopeful adjunct, similarly confused, in attendance. The assembled senators asked us to make presentations to the group on our qualifications, our backgrounds, and our interests in serving before moving us into a Zoom breakout room so they could confer. In the breakout room, we commiserated with one another—neither one of us had realized we would be presenting to the group or even that this was a competitive position. As they discussed our respective merits behind closed doors, we shared our frustrations not just with this process but with the many opaque processes and systems at the college that left adjuncts—by far the teaching majority—feeling like outsiders, even when specifically invited.

In the end, the senators selected me, and so I became the sole voice within the college's shared governance structure for more than 700 employees. The imbalance in power between the other senators and me was drawn in sharp relief by the fact that they met on campus in person, but I joined via video call, a necessity as the college did not provide me with an office space from which to lead the synchronous online class that let out just before our meetings started. Delays and degradation in audio meant that I would occasionally miss portions of the day's discussion, and whenever I spoke, someone would speak over me. I soon learned that this power imbalance was not simply a quirk of technology but a reality written into the group's bylaws. The representatives for the full-time faculty were elected by their peers, had voting rights, and their service on the Senate was compensated as part of their salaried duties in the union contract. As the adjunct representative, I was appointed by the other senators (as described above), could not vote on any Senate business, and my participation was voluntary and unpaid.

After joining the Senate, I was put to work on an already developed project: an Adjunct Satisfaction Survey, the first of its kind in the college's history. The full-time faculty had already drafted questions, but when they asked for my input, I pointed out that there was no question about compensation on the survey and suggested adding one, noting that it was the primary issue brought up in any discussion with adjuncts. They accepted this in the end, but not without pushback—Faculty Senate already made a recommendation on adjunct pay, they were continuing to advocate for it, they didn't want to hear the inevitable complaints, and so on. In the end, the argument that won them over was that *not* including a question specifically on pay would cause respondents to shoehorn compensation concerns into their responses to other questions, potentially skewing the quantitative data.

When it came time to code the data and share a report with the rest of the college and the Board of Trustees, the senators eschewed the industry standard practice for calculating a satisfaction score (C-SAT), instead aggregating together “Very Satisfied,” “Satisfied,” and “Neutral” to suggest that most adjunct faculty (>50% of respondents) were happy with their experience at the college across almost every category on the survey. When I pointed this out during a meeting and, subsequently in emails, noting that the math being used didn’t conform to any established practice and that there was, in fact, a widely accepted system for reporting and benchmarking this data, I was told that my suggestions were too skewed in the opposite direction. While a small portion of the full-time faculty on the Senate spoke up to support my suggestions, the majority did not, and little in the final report changed. When the president reported back after presenting the data to the Board of Trustees, she noted their excitement about the high overall scores but shared no other feedback, a sign to me that the many concerns voiced by adjuncts in the survey responses had gone unheard.

In the year I spent on the Senate, it was rare that I left our Wednesday afternoon meetings without a headache and a new set of frustrations to work through. In conversation, my fellow senators were quick to note their frustration about adjunct compensation and every other underfunded area of the college, from advising to classrooms to building maintenance. But in their reports and other communications with the rest of the college and the upper administration, their messaging seemed relentlessly positive, so much so that when a member of the Executive Committee attended one of our meetings, he expressed genuine surprise to learn that the college was not already meeting the Faculty Senate’s recommendation for adjunct pay. The faculty on Senate (and the full-time faculty more generally) were genuinely sympathetic to the plight of adjuncts at the college, particularly as many of them began as adjuncts either at Cincinnati State or at other institutions. Still, as much as they might express frustration or regret in private conversation, their unwillingness to enter more public dialogue fostered a culture in which adjuncts believe that their exploitation is the only possible reality, even as the college invests heavily in other areas and reports strong enrollment. The material poverty experienced by adjuncts at the college is not directly linked to the college’s financial circumstances, nor is it simply a sector-wide reality, as evidenced by the higher pay and better conditions offered by comparable institutions. Rather, it is a reflection of the culture of poverty at the college, in which the people within the institution have been convinced that no matter the material circumstances of the college, change is impossible.

Conclusion

As we move through our respective institutional contexts, we are constantly running up against cultural backlash that limits the possibilities for change in our institutions. GSG tells Bethany she can’t advocate for a union and work in student government, the Faculty Senate tells Alex that it’s pointless to ask adjuncts about their pay, and both institutions suggest that low pay for contingent instructors is the only way the system works. We’re told that we have to redirect efforts to something more reasonable, like starting a food pantry for hungry graduate students or a social group for adjuncts. It’s not ideal, nor is it a real solution, but it’s attainable.

Both of us desire to be change-makers. We want to push for real, material improvements for contingent instructors, to point out the structures of oppression that surround us and work

against them. Placed into the culture of poverty that surrounds us, we instead end up facing friendly colleague after friendly colleague who, while ideologically supportive of our goals, tells us they just aren't possible, and that's just the way things are. As stakeholders within our institutions, these colleagues write these ideas into the culture of the institution itself through what LaFrance refers to as "boss texts"—"texts [that] carry ideas, language, and rhetorical frameworks between individuals (even those with little personal interaction) to impose notions of ideal practice and affiliations . . . not just sources of information but shapers of thinking and practice" (43). These boss texts–from syllabi to employment contracts to programmatic documents to bylaws—define the realities of our institutions. Those creating them are not, generally, acting out of ill-will, and their unwillingness to speak directly to pressing labor issues within each institution in these official texts often reflects their own limited power and fear of repercussions. Taken en masse, however, these half-hearted sympathies from well-meaning individuals result in a significant systemic challenge for labor activists to overcome when working to create real change.

This pervasive culture of poverty asks newcomers, particularly those in contingent roles like graduate students and adjuncts, to limit expectations, prepare for disappointment, and be grateful for what little they have—in short, it limits the institutional imagination. While this messaging is often mired in the logic of poverty, it does not necessarily correspond to an actual material poverty in the institution. It's not that our colleges can't afford to pay us more or to support us better; it's that their respective administrations refuse to do so. This distinction is important—to conjure up money that doesn't exist is an impossible task, but to shift money from one column in the college's budget to another is an exponentially smaller intervention. We recognize, of course, that our two institutions are not necessarily reflective of every institutional context—there are many colleges experiencing actual financial stress, plummeting enrollments, and other factors that do materially constraint the kinds of change possible—but we worry that, like the corporations reporting record profits during a global pandemic, many solvent institutions are seizing onto these austerity logics regardless of local material conditions because doing so benefits their bottom line.

While faculty are often powerless to change decisions made by upper administrators and trustees, it is their responsibility (and the responsibility of faculty senates, graduate student governments, unions and other such bodies) to advocate against logics that suggest that poor labor conditions (and thus, poor learning conditions) are an inevitability that all educational institutions must accept. By drawing attention to these logics in these small, localized ways, we hope to encourage others to reflect on their own institutional cultures and their roles in reifying or resisting them. This work might be as simple as pushing back when colleagues suggest that it is impossible for an institution to survive without the exploitation of adjuncts and graduate student instructors, or it may look more like sustained advocacy and organizing to safeguard and expand protections for the most vulnerable workers in the institution.

We also hope readers will adapt the methodology employed here to turn their critical study toward their own institutions and the systems that sustain academic poverty within them. Particularly when combined with the localized advocacy work described above, research can help change culture. We are academics, after all, and we value data and qualitative study. If we understand the problem and disseminate information about how academic poverty is

sustained, the increased awareness may help change the culture of poverty in our field, or at least underscore the fact that it is a system purposely maintained, not an inevitability. We encourage other scholars to research this subject, whether through autoethnographic work, institutional ethnography, or more quantitative or large-scale inquiries into the culture of poverty in university work, and we look forward to the day when academic culture values its workers and prioritizes their safety, dignity, and comfort.

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Paternalism and Penury of the POC PhD Student

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This article examines the rhetoric surrounding two kinds of persons of color (POC) who inhabit American graduate academia: the POC international student and the historically marginalized American POC. In *Teaching Black History to White People*, the historian Leonard Moore notes a tension between some Black Americans and first-generation immigrants in the United States:

> There is a belief among many Black folks that one of the first things immigrants learn when they come to America is to dislike Black people, and to dismiss the legacy of slavery, segregation, and racism. During the COVID-19 pandemic I did a ton of workshops and talks for corporations, associations, and other organizations, with those in attendance largely conservative white folks. Most of the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, but I soon noticed a trend. Many of the immigrants on some of these calls found my presentation to be problematic. . . . Here are her words: . . . I am a Chinese woman who grew up in Brazil and if I can make it in the United States then I know Black people can (Moore 25).

This quote, albeit anecdotal, goes to the heart of a certain kind of red herring that is often presented when discussing the question of racism and labor: If this POC can make it, why can't you? This logical fallacy, which sidesteps the intersectionality of marginalization, has historical precedents that span numerous postcolonial countries. In Trinidad and Tobago and other parts of the Caribbean, the abolishment of slavery was followed by the procurement of a new form of cheap labor: indentured labor from South Asia. The influx of this new population of workers created deep resentments which resonate to this day (Brereton 189). In India, the British colonial government deliberately created a class of subjects who were "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay) in order to translate and educate the native population and further colonial commerce. The creation of this class had far-reaching ramifications in education and industry long after Indian independence. The postcolonial academic, working in the West and engaging with Western rhetoric, must be conscious of being viewed as the "native informant," as was noted in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?": "Certain varieties of the Indian elite are at best native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other. But one must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous" (Spivak 26).

My paper seeks to not simply place in historical context the question of labor and racial tension in American academia, but to examine the manner in which this tension impacts American academia today and in the future. I assert that questioning the rhetoric surrounding POC PhD students and the conditions in which they work is not an act of altruism or unnecessary diversity equity and inclusion; it is an informed business decision in the neoliberal United States of America. POC PhD students, like POC in many other industries, perform essential but undercompensated tasks that more privileged individuals may not wish to do. They are adults, with adult responsibilities and needs, and their choice to seek higher credentials is not a decision to unnecessarily prolong adolescence (Greene and Burke). PhD labor is essential to education and scientific innovation, and universities and governments must adequately compensate them if they wish to remain competitive on a global scale.

The international student faces several expensive barriers of entry to the American university. First and foremost is a standardized English-language test, often the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS). These tests, which often cost hundreds of dollars ("TOEFL iBT Test Fees"), serve to exclude all but the wealthiest in several postcolonial nations. If the lingua franca of these nations is English, due to a history of British or American colonialism, then this requirement adds insult to injury. Even when the English-language-test requirement is waived, other standardized tests such as the Graduate Record Examinations (which is not conducted at the same frequency in all nations, thereby belying the illusion of a level playing field even if cost were not a factor), application fees, the refusal to accept certain non-American educational certifications, an unforgiving exchange rate, and F1 visa regulations—which prohibit students from working off-campus except in rare circumstances—place students in a precarious financial position. This position is further exacerbated by expectations related to under-compensated attendance at international conferences (for which the expenses may be significantly higher for those lacking the power of an American passport), publication, and service. After having sacrificed both time and financial security in the pursuit of the American Dream and having provided vital labor to the university in the process, students who wish to stay are then faced with the paucity of jobs willing or able to sponsor visas, and the necessity of abandoning familial relationships due to the US's stringent guidelines regarding who may or may not be sponsored for a visa ("Family Immigration").

One may look at the precarity outlined above and simply say, "So what?" Foreign education is a privilege, not a right, and those who choose to do it are, presumably, of sound mind and can weigh the costs and benefits of their choice. International students are not citizens, and the United States has very little obligation to ensure their lifelong welfare. This ignores the fact that graduate students, in addition to paying taxes and tuition, make up a significant portion of teaching and research staff at many American institutions (Colby). They are responsible for imparting education, innovating, and guiding generations of American students—Americans who work, pay taxes and tuition, and ostensibly are the reason for the existence of the country and its universities. They cannot do their jobs to the best of their ability if they are perpetually anxious about housing, food, healthcare, transport, family, and the future. And, if they truly are the best and brightest minds of their generation and have the intellectual ability to perform an accurate risk assessment of studying, teaching, and

researching in the United States, they may see this precarity and choose to go elsewhere. Canada, Germany, Australia and several other wealthy nations have historically encouraged the influx of educated immigrants (Levinson-King; Boutelet; Rajendran et. al.). If the United States wishes to remain competitive and attract the best and brightest students, instead of only the wealthiest or most desperate, it must protect its international graduate labor.

International graduate labor is vital to attracting and retaining lucrative international undergraduate studentships. International students rarely have access to the scholarships and low-interest loans available to American students and are therefore a significant source of revenue, particularly for less well-endowed universities (Lim). Many wealthy students from China and India, in particular, may choose to seek an international education because the demand for a high quality education far exceeds the supply in their own populous nations. These students have many options and can very easily take their money to nations and universities that are better able to meet their needs. Attracting such students requires universities to have staff who can understand the cultural nuances and specialized needs of this lucrative cohort. First-generation international graduate students, who have spent the bulk of their lives in India and China, are therefore indispensable in attracting and retaining wealthy international undergraduate students.

The rhetoric surrounding international PhD students on campus is further complicated by the presence of American students of color, as well as undocumented international students. As Moore has highlighted, POC students, and Black students in particular, may feel that the POC international student, in addition to serving as a red herring, is quick to invalidate the systemic injustices and structural inequities that are part of the lived experience of the American POC. Significant scholarship exists on the myth of the "model minority" and its historical use in disguising systemic racism (Walton and Truong). A lack of awareness of systemic injustice in the United States by international students may be aggravated by physical distance of their place of origin from the US which prevents them from gaining first-hand knowledge, the selective distribution of American media in their home countries, as well as, in the case of postcolonial nations, internalized racism and colorism that is a legacy of colonialism.

Placing American and international POC graduate students in opposition ignores the similar economic and other forms of marginalization that may contribute to their presence on campus. The subaltern student is, to invoke Spivak, "heterogenous," (26) and some international students may have more in common with American students than other international students. The model minority myth homogenizes the international student experience, but international students from different countries are subject to different international treaties that determine the difficulty in getting visas, conditions of work, pathways to citizenship, etc.; different job markets due to their fields of study; and, differing living conditions in their countries-of-origin due to race, religion, class, gender, caste, sexuality, etc. I come from a country where "brain drain," or the departure of well-educated individuals for more congenial nations, is a significant concern (Lavakare). Brain drain from the United States to elsewhere may currently seem like a relatively minor concern, but as remote work becomes more ubiquitous post-pandemic, a lack of social security and public services as well as systemic inequities may induce the American intelligentsia to live and work

elsewhere, thereby impacting the domestic economy. As of 2022, according to the National Science Foundation, 35,311 US citizens and permanent residents and 19,633 temporary visa holders received a doctorate ("Executive Summary").

Regardless of visa status, undertaking a PhD is an arduous and financially difficult endeavor. It typically takes over six years, during which time even the fully funded student will likely subsist on wages that are well beneath the median income and may be compelled to take on additional debt ("Path to the Doctorate"; "How PhD Students Get Paid"). As graduate labor, a student does not have access to an employer-supported 401(K) and therefore must delay retirement, and if they are international students on F1 visas, they cannot work off campus or for more that 20 hours a week except in very specific circumstances. An American PhD student or a student with a work permit may supplement this low income with "side hustles," but this hampers the time available to work on the PhD and may ultimately delay graduation and make the PhD student's financial situation even more precarious.

The PhD student may be aware that they are signing up for an extended period of penury. If they do so anyway, it may be because they have an undeniable, unquenchable desire to teach or conduct research, but it may also be because they have few other options due to systemic marginalization. Pursuing a graduate education allows American students to defer student loans and therefore may seem like an attractive option for those who have graduated with large loans and few job prospects, even if in the long run it involves taking on more debt. International students from countries where the currency is significantly weaker than the dollar and the minimum wage is also much lower might take solace in the fact that even the low PhD wage is higher than what they may have earned at home. Thus universities may, again, feel little incentive to improve the living conditions of PhD students. But a higher education system reliant on the destitution of its teachers and researchers cannot attract students and researchers who *do* have other options and, in turn, will only create a cyclical loop of poor students becoming poor teachers who again create poor students and poor research. This will, in the long run, have a detrimental impact on the economic prospects of the university as a whole, as many universities depend on the donations of former students as well as a track record of placing students in lucrative positions to remain viable.

Marginalization is intersectional, and many of the problems outlined above affect immigrant PhDs and American PhDs of many different ethnicities. Academia has long been seen as an ivory tower, in which only the most privileged exist, operating in a space that is out of touch with the rest of the population. Gaining higher education has also been seen as a result of excessive wealth, which allows individuals to unnecessarily delay "adult" responsibilities such as marriage and childbirth (Greene and Burke). Paying graduate labor sub-par wages is seen as acceptable because they are not really doing "adult" jobs, just as service industry jobs are seen as "jobs for teenagers" despite the number of adult immigrants employed in the industry (Talwar). The lion's share of doctoral recipients, as of 2021, are in the 26-40 age group, which is also the period in which Americans expect to have and raise children (Korhonen). As of 2022, according to the National Science Foundation's survey of earned doctorates, only 14.6% of PhD students in the United States were self-funded, and the majority derived funding from research assistantships, traineeships, fellowships, teaching assistantships, and other labor for their universities ("Path to the Doctorate"). Anecdotally, I

study and teach at a highly ranked public school, and several of my colleagues are first-generation students who have only been able to pursue a PhD because the school fully funds the students in my department, and the university, in general, is more affordable than many private universities.

The number of Black and white individuals enrolling in college go up when there is job scarcity (Barbu 78); many who apply do so because they *require* a livelihood and are simply attempting to survive in the same economy as everyone else. Some individuals may also choose higher education because it allows them to defer their student loans (Groves). Indeed, the literature notes how Black communities are disproportionately burdened by this type of debt (Rodney and Mincey). This failure to gain an adequate return on investment for a college education, and the resulting drive to seek further education, is also often seen as a personal failure on the part of the student instead of a systemic failure due to the devaluation of a college education, exponential rise in tuition, predatory student lending, and several other factors outside the student's control (Hanson).

Even when the economy is good and individuals seek PhDs solely for the intellectual satisfaction of teaching or research, students' passions should be nurtured, not de-incentivized. International students on non-immigrant visas, by definition, plan to leave at the end of their period of study and are thus not focused solely on what the American market desires at the present moment. They study and work in American universities, in fields that, even when not the most lucrative, are vital for scientific innovation. They do this for the exposure to the American system of education and the possible advantages their degrees may provide in their home countries. The world has been coming to terms with generative AI and the subsequent ease with which erroneous, plagiarized, and endlessly regurgitated data can be generated. Universities are bastions in which new research is rigorously peer reviewed and thereby authenticated. PhD students and other academics are encouraged, at least on paper, to prioritize innovation and accuracy over profit, and are therefore necessary to provide checks and balances, or at least "good" data, for generative AI. They safeguard and advance knowledge that would rapidly become extinct if profit were the only motivation. When industries "move fast and break things" (Taneja), the role of academia is to move slowly and save things.

It is perhaps relevant here to acknowledge my own positionality and the impact it has on the subject matter of this essay. I am a thirty-something, married, "upper-caste," cis-female, Indian PhD student in the humanities on an F1 visa from a single-income family. Due to the relatively low cost of much of higher education in India and other privileges, I was able to get a master's degree without incurring debt. I then worked for several years to save money to participate in the expensive PhD application process. When I got in, several members of my family said that I should not go, that I was too old, that there was no future in the humanities, that I should find a husband with a stable STEM job and have children before my time runs out. I ignored this advice, but the thought of conducting research and teaching generations of intelligent, hardworking Americans was daunting.

I feel extremely privileged to be at my institution, but I do make significantly less than the median wage and face a very uncertain job market. My husband is also on a visa, so we face the two-body problem and must sacrifice living together and possibly building a family in order to pursue our goals. I believe that we both have important jobs and are assets to the institutions

at which we work. But we think of going home or to a different, more immigrant-friendly country very often, as we want to support our parents as they get older and be with each other. If we leave, we will miss much about this country. At the same time, I believe this country will also lose something in our departure, as well as from the departure of other POC students, both American and non-American, who cannot or will not sacrifice life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in order to gain an American degree.

The POC PhD student could, perhaps, accept the low pay that is part of their job if university administrators and local governments ensured that infrastructure was in place such that they could afford to meet their needs even at that low pay. Policy makers may want the international student to stay on after their PhD and become educated, young taxpayers in a country with a declining birth rate, or simply to work for subpar wages for a few years before going back to their home country. Either way, it is in their interest to ensure that students are not driven into debt on their PhD stipends; debt will only encourage the sagacious (and presumably desirable) PhD students to stay away and the desperate (and presumably undesirable) PhD students to cling desperately to the United States in order to recoup their losses. Non-monetary support—such as inexpensive public transport, good healthcare, and more flexibility to work off-campus—may go a long way toward attracting and retaining talented scholars both from the United States and abroad.

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Precarity, Political Economy, and the Accommodated Classroom

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> *A body can be broken. If we keep coming up against walls, it feels like we can shatter into a million pieces. Tiny little pieces.*
>
> – Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (180)

In recent years, I have needed accommodations. After years of relative conformity, I suddenly needed my work space to look very different from the status quo. This change was precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as pregnancy, childbirth, recovery, and breastfeeding my two young children—an intense period in my life that spanned nearly four years in total. I share my own story of pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum needs, and childcare as a way to elucidate the challenges both students and workers may face at similar stages in their lives, the precarity these changes can precipitate, and how willing accommodation can prevent some such precarity. In this article, I demonstrate that an accommodative classroom as the standard instead of the exception, and now more accessible since the Covid-19 pandemic, is essential to both learning and a socially just political economy.

In *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Naomi Klein writes about "the intersection between superprofits and megadisasters" (10). In her book, she writes of idyllic coastal fishing communities being wiped out by tsunamis, only to be bought up for next to nothing by wealthy hoteliers. Wars are waged for the exploitation of natural resources, and the "shocked" inhabitants are left with few options other than to take what is offered and flee their homes. Likewise, in academia, cataclysmic shake-ups, lack of employment security, unexpected illness, pregnancies, and unaccommodated spaces can all precipitate unwanted and unjust change and precarity. As Catherine Chaput claims in *Market Affect and the Rhetoric of Political Economic Debates*, "The valorization of commodities into economic profit is also the valorization of an affective subject with his or her own rhetorical predisposition" (32). Since economic profit drives every sector, one must valorize accommodation within the classroom and within the workspace to combat the scenarios that so often throw people into precarity.

I want to acknowledge early on that I am not currently disabled, and I share my experience of a time when I needed accommodations by way of helping myself and others think more about more accommodative teaching. In thinking through my own identity, I refer to Nirmala Erevelles, who asks herself and readers, "What does it mean to come to terms with the transgressive vagaries of queer/crip identity as assemblage—precarious/partial/body-without-organs/liminal/ affective/ molecular—within political economic contexts imbricated in colonial/neocolonial practices of unrelenting social, economic, and militarized violence?" In reading her work, I am inspired to ask myself this question about my own body, the classroom spaces I help create, and how I might mitigate the "unrelenting social, economic, and militarized violence" all around us (Erevelles).

My Experience

Although childless women are thirty-three percent more likely to be in a tenure line than women with children (Waxman), some women in academia do have children. Life events like childbirth are often celebrated socially for a short period of time with something like a baby shower and a meal train, if the family is lucky. However, the significant needs surrounding this type of life event often span months and even years. As of the publication of this book, there is no maternity leave in the United States. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) exists only as an unpaid option, for a limited period of time, and for people who have already been employed for a year or more ("Family"). As an unpaid option, FMLA essentially functions to minimize job loss (a bare minimum) but does not equate to effective support. The reality is that many people need accommodations for much longer than national statutes allow, and they need a kind of support that often does not exist. However, without these accommodations, the lives of individuals can be easily and unnecessarily tossed into tumult, with challenges so dire they may not be overcome in a lifetime, such as poverty, housing insecurity, and the trauma that can result from experiences like food instability. Or, more specific to the childrearing experience, trauma can occur surrounding feeding—breastfeeding or bottle feeding—and bonding.

During my own first pregnancy, childbirth, and time breastfeeding, I experienced a new and notable physicality to my life. The excitement of being newly pregnant made it difficult to focus on other things during my first months of pregnancy. In later pregnancy, frequent medical appointments took up many regular work hours. It became increasingly difficult to sit at my desk because my large pregnant belly took up space between the chair and desk that had previously been empty. In very late pregnancy, finding suitable clothing for work was costly and difficult, and I found myself recycling the same maternity tights and bulky dresses every few days. Much like Sarah Ahmed's experience of disability, which she describes in her book *Living a Feminist Life*, what was once normal for me became steadily unmanageable. Ahmed writes, "I learned how disability is worldly because I came up against the world; the different ways you are treated, the opening of doors, concerned faces, the closing of doors, rigid indifference. But most of all, I came to feel the little bumps on the street, little bumps I had not even noticed before. Those little bumps became walls that took a huge amount of energy just to get over or to get around" (180-81). The burden of these "bumps" can have enormous

economic and emotional consequences for individuals, while those same burdens may remain completely invisible to so many other users of that same road.

Next, after experiencing pregnancy while working, there was the childbirth event itself to contend with. This meant a transformative birth experience and a beautiful new baby, but the experience also resulted in a longer than expected hospital stay and even more frequent medical appointments. While many people are cleared to exercise after only six weeks, I still felt very fragile at that time. For example, when I was several months postpartum and needed to be back on campus for a meeting, I found myself walking across the huge parking lot, sweaty and shaky. It felt like too much too soon, which surprised me as a primigravida. The expectation was that I would be able to work in conventional ways after only a few weeks, but it felt very different in my body. After only short periods away from my baby, I would experience letdowns. Regarding feeding, I was also somewhat surprised to learn that pumping and formula, both options that others used to care for their babies, were not options for me. Based on so many of the other narratives I had read and heard, and by the appearances of other people, I expected to "bounce back" more quickly. Very little of my postpartum experience, however, was how I thought it would be. To be effective and happy, and to avoid harm and precarity, I needed my life and my workspace to change in ways that surprised me. After that experience, I would never see my colleagues' or students' accommodations in the same way. I would suddenly understand more deeply than ever before the fine line between effective accommodations and precarity.

The Pandemic

Then, much like my first pregnancy irreversibly changed my perspective on accommodations, the pandemic brought to light the role of the physical body in modern learning like never before. The long negotiation and waiting for accessibility changed swiftly as a deadly virus showed institutions of higher learning that they were capable of creating more accommodating spaces. Work that had needed to be done for purposes of access and equity was suddenly forced into existence. Importantly, bodies that previously lacked access to certain physical spaces were suddenly accommodated like never before, not sidelined in a separate or different space, but joining the full conversation through newly ubiquitous Zoom rooms and chats and asynchronous online learning management systems.

In December of 2019, I brought home my second baby. As associate professor in English/Writing and director of the Writing Center, I used a "maternity accommodation" to teach fully online, an accommodation granted not by the institution, but by the kindness and understanding of my colleagues, who rallied to create what would be a livable schedule for me as my body healed and adapted to the care of a new baby. Still, I needed to attend various meetings, which I vaguely remember, sleep deprived, physically sore, and fatigued just from walking through parking lots and down hallways. Frequently, I had to bring my newborn to these meetings, and I was worried about bringing such a new immune system into these spaces, which I remember as being small, crowded, and too hot.

As I navigated my postpartum time, in early winter of 2020, I also began hearing about a deadly virus emerging and circulating throughout the world. It officially made landfall in the United States in Seattle in late January ("CDC"). I saw on the news that a new coronavirus

quarantine center was quickly constructed and then collapsed in Wuhan, killing at least ten people and injuring more in early March ("Coronavirus"). Politicians said very little. News reports sounded dire, but were yet unsensational. The people around me locally seemed to pay little attention. No accommodations were being made as of yet, and I was still trudging into meetings, often with my baby in tow, wondering when work would start to feel "normal" again.

Choosing Inclusivity

Finally, the call was made, and by spring break, the nation began a two-week shutdown. Most institutions of higher education shifted to online or remote access at that time, and I breathed a sigh of relief because now I could care for my baby on-demand and also fully participate in my work. That's the thing—for me personally, I always wanted both. I wanted to physically care for my babies in the way that they needed, and I also wanted to work. Attending to my service, scholarship, and teaching obligations brought me deep satisfaction and fulfillment. As by babies slept, and I worked by the light of my laptop screen that spring, I wondered how many other new mothers were being accommodated by remote access to their work or to their educations. I realized that some of my own students were now able to participate in ways that their bodies or circumstances previously had not allowed: working-class people with multiple part-time jobs, those who lacked physical mobility, and people with Covid-19 (or other infectious diseases) who should be in quarantine.

Furthermore, as director of the campus writing center, I had eventually hoped to offer an in-house, remote-access tutoring option, which would provide our tutors with online tutoring experience and would offer online students direct access to our writing tutors. Initially I thought the project would take at least a year to implement, but after the "lockdown," a platform for online tutoring was planned and put into place within a few weeks. And my institution was not alone. In fact, according to Sarah Bergfeld of eTutoringOnline.org, there was also a huge increase in eTutoring appointments after the start of the pandemic. Their numbers were up by over 50% once the pandemic was in full swing (Bergfeld).

Online remote access, not as a one-off or as an exception but as the modality for everybody, suddenly offered inclusive access like never before. In that way, the pandemic wrought a revolution to accessibility and accommodations. Now that the switch has been made, we face the question of how to maintain this state of revolutionary access and accommodations and also maintain an equitable space for the sometimes complicated, sometimes complex, and sometimes changing bodies that are always in classroom spaces.

Whether remote, asynchronous online, or face-to-face, the classroom is always a rhetorical and embodied space and, informed by other scholars and my own personal experience, understanding the body in the classroom is a fundamentally feminist inquiry supportive of a social-justice mission. As such, my venture here works toward a feminist epistemology for every body in the classroom, working toward the kind of "[d]isability justice [that] has the power to not only challenge our thinking about access but to fundamentally change the way we understand organizing and how we fight for social change" that Mia Mingus writes about in her work, "Changing the Framework: Disability Justice." Moving forward, I also want to keep in mind Sara Ahmed's argument that accommodation is an ongoing feminist pursuit: "We have to keep pushing to open up spaces to those who have not been accommodated. Or those

who are not accommodated have to keep pushing even after they have apparently been accommodated" (114). To Ahmed, the work of accommodation must be done by everyone, and when it has not been effectively done, the burden remains on those who are not yet effectively accommodated. Further, those who have the power to create accommodations must do so.

In this I am reminded of that first "remote access" term during the Covid pandemic, spring 2020. While nearly all classes were remote, there were many gray areas, including tutoring. Facemasks and plexiglass dividers were offered as a source of protection. However, there was nobody telling me as the writing center's director exactly whether or not my writing tutors needed to be physically in the writing center space. As a person with some power in the situation, it became clear to me that I could protect these workers, and so I did. I gave writing tutors the option to work fully remotely if they wanted to, and one hundred percent of my tutors chose to work remotely that term. As writing center director, I chose to continue this practice until after the adult vaccine was widely available. (It would be much longer until children could be vaccinated.) Others with power made different decisions. I stand behind my decision to protect others whenever I was able because precarity and the possibility of harm suddenly became very real. A year after lockdowns began, and just as the vaccine was becoming available to the public, my cousin died of Covid. A few weeks after that, our former daycare provider died of Covid, too.

On this, and less dire levels, as well, Ahmed reminds us, "If environments are built to enable some bodies to do what they can, environments can be what stops bodies from doing: a cannot is how some bodies meet an environment" (125). As a teacher, I face many limitations regarding the classroom "space." However, I also always have some power over the classroom environments I make. Do I accept late work? Do I grade on prior knowledge? Do I communicate something that might help diverse populations feel welcome and safe? Do I offer Zoom meetings? Do I stop, pause, breathe, and remember to treat everybody in the space as fully human, complex, and worthy of love?

Good Pedagogy Was Always Accommodative

An accommodative classroom means drawing the practices of great teachers into new and present contexts, with help from the likes of bell hooks, Victor Villanueva, Paulo Freire, and many others. An accommodative classroom means listening to stories from complex bodies, like my own postpartum story, and using Krista Ratcliffe's work in *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* in adjusting to these new learning spaces. There is never one blanket solution for an accommodation. Done well, accommodations are individualized, require listening, and intend to understand. In Maureen Daly Goggin and Shirley K. Rose's edited collection *Women's Ways of Making*, they offer a complex understanding of making that can help us do the work of maintaining an effective and equitable new learning space, using the framework of Aristotle's episteme, techne, and phronesis. The book "draws attention to *making* as three epistemologies: an episteme, a techne, and a phronesis that together give pointed consideration to making as a rhetorical endeavor" (Daly Goggin and Rose 3-4). They "collapse several impoverished binaries: mind/body, producer/consumer, passive recipients/active agents, public/private, craft/art, and man/woman" (Daly Goggin and Rose 6).

Reading this work, I am thus inspired to think about the classroom I help create or make in more complex ways—a necessity for accommodation. Ultimately, our understanding of the body in the classroom, an understanding that has changed and been made more complex by the pandemic experience, can help higher learning improve the equitability and accessibility of the classroom space.

When I think of some of my favorite classrooms, I also think of two great teachers, Victor Villanueva and bell hooks. Villanueva was my professor during graduate school, and I was able to learn from hooks' when she lectured (regularly) at the university where I was teaching. Both excelled in connecting the theoretical to the human. Both shared their own personal stories. More than that, they shared details from their lives—the kinds of things you might tell a friend—in order to teach. For example, in hooks' lectures, she frequently spoke about love, being in love, wanting love, wanting companionship, eating for pleasure, losing interest in food, and just enjoying breathing air. Somehow, in doing so, she fostered a space for deeper connectedness and deeper learning. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks states, "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (13). Finding a way to "car[e] for the souls of our students" was, for hooks, a pedagogical strategy that allowed her to see her students as individuals and to attend to their individual needs.

For Villanueva, the classroom is also about creating positive change. He writes, "And the classroom is an ideal site in which to affect change; the classroom, where we come in contact with so many, the many who in turn will come in contact with many more. It's a utopian hope, but it is the utopian possibility that makes for a teacher" (121). Inspired by Villanueva, I ask, how do we "come in contact" with each other in the classroom through a blank Zoom screen? By understanding learning not as just a transfer of information, but as a space to share what we know with each other—and by remembering that students know something, too. For hooks, effective teaching will "transgress those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote, assembly line approach to learning" (*Teaching* 13). Later, she continues, "Making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy" (*Teaching* 39). A democratic classroom must also be one that accommodates our students, even those (especially those) who cannot participate in traditional or typical ways. Facilitating these spaces means acknowledging privileges and precarities and working to support the people who occupy learning spaces. This type of pedagogy—concerned with the dialectic, the liberatory education, the identities, and the accommodated space—is often called a critical pedagogy.

Both hooks and Villanueva were deeply influenced by Paulo Freire's liberatory pedagogy. hooks writes:

> When I first encountered Paulo Freire, I was eager to see if his style of teaching would embody the pedagogical practices he described so eloquently in his work. During the short time I studied with him, I was deeply moved by his presence, by the way in which his manner of teaching exemplified his pedagogical theory. (Not all students interested in Freire have had a similar experience.) My experience with him restored my faith in liberatory education. I had never wanted to surrender the conviction that one could teach without reinforcing existing systems

> of domination. I needed to know that professors did not have to be dictators in the classroom. (*Teaching* 18)

hooks learned firsthand that Freire was, indeed, effective in his teaching, in no small part because of his "presence," and the experience of learning from him allowed her to sustain a belief that one could teach outside the paradigms of domination and control.

Meanwhile in *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, Victor Villanueva emphasizes the classroom space as also always dialectical:

> Students discover that they are constantly in dialectical relationships with, in conflict with their environments and that these environments are affected by social, political, and economic circumstances and events. Personal lives must contend with social, political, and economic situations. For Freire, the more students are aware of the dialectic, the more they can affect changes in their selves and in their environments. (55)

Likewise, this applies to teachers: as they become aware of the complexity of the classroom, they become aware that a simple transference of information from one able and present body to another is never going to be a complete education.

But this process is not a simple one. There is a certain culture of scarcity or elitism embedded in the culture of higher education. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks writes, "All too often educators, especially university professors, fear their work will not be valued by other academics if it is presented in a way that makes it accessible to a wider audience" (111). When imagining an accommodated classroom, one of the first concerns participants face is the question of whether or not rigor is being appropriately maintained. In fact, my own students who need accommodations often share with me that they are worried about coming across as lazy or uninterested, which is a major problem when the college classroom is intended to be one of engagement and interest. Sometimes formal accommodations supported by a campus diversity services office are too rigid or ill-fitting for the needs at hand (not to diminish the fact that, for many, disability services are the first and last line of support for accommodations and success).

hooks also states that a critical aspect of critical pedagogy means the following: "Accepting the decentering of the West globally, embracing multiculturalism, compels educators to focus attention on the issue of voice. Who speaks? Who listens? And why?" (*Feminist* 40). I would argue that the way teachers answer these questions says everything about the kinds of classrooms they have made. The teacher of an accommodated classroom asks their students, what, for example, they need to speak, understanding that their answers will be different and will likely vary over time. Sometimes students will not have clear answers, and their solutions will be discovered individually or in tandem with other classroom participants. The teacher of an accommodated classroom asks their students, how can I better hear you, with the understanding that their answers to this question, too, will likely vary and change over time. Sometimes the answers are never discovered during the course or a term, but the effort in finding a way forward is meaningful and can feel accommodative, as well. Asking these questions has everything to do with adapting the space to meet the needs of the actual people involved and balancing the complex needs of the students, the curriculum, and the capabilities of the teacher(s).

Teachers, and others in charge of the classroom space (however it may be imagined), need to listen to the needs of the classroom participants. Ratcliffe advocates for "hearing what we cannot see" (19) and reflecting on the "troubled identifications" (47) that exist within, around, and sometimes because of, the classroom space. "Listening pedagogically" is a way to aid both student and teacher in learning, making adjustments, and, in a sense, creating the learning space together (133). This cannot happen unless a good deal of listening happens, so accommodations can be personal and context-specific.

Finally, a note on failure: both when I was pregnant and when I was newly postpartum, I experienced both effective accommodative experiences and also failed ones. Sometimes institutions failed to effectively accommodate me. Sometimes people failed to effectively accommodate me. Sometimes, I failed to understand my own needs until it was seemingly too late, and I was already deeply immersed in a setting that was not working. However, failure is a common and necessary part of the paradigm shift. Along the way, teachers will make mistakes and so will students. In challenging her students in new ways, hooks writes, "Moving away from the need for immediate affirmation was crucial to my growth as a teacher" (*Teaching* 42). Understanding that immediate success was not a given was a necessary step in her development as a great teacher. Attempts, failures, and challenges can all feel bad, even when there is a longer-term positive outcome. Furthermore, "The presence of tension—and at times even conflict—often meant that students did not enjoy my classes or love me, their professor, as I secretly wanted them to do" (hooks *Teaching* 42). So, while previously hooks saw herself as a teacher who cared for her students and created fully human experiences for her students, in practice this was not always the peaceful utopia some might imagine.

Ubiquitous Accessibility

Given what we know about effective and empowered classroom spaces, and keeping in mind hooks' work in identity, Villanueva's dialectical classroom relationships (where class, race, ability, and more interact for learning)—all somewhat influenced by Freire's liberatory education—during the pandemic, when rapid accommodations were taking place for not just a select few, all participants, educators, students, and their institutions became aware of just how accommodative they could be. "Zoom rooms" and other synchronous online programs were put to use like never before. In the most obvious ways, Zoom offers access to a wide variety of people: not only pregnant and postpartum people (which was my own experience), but also students like those students who were transitioning and preferred to keep their cameras off, those experiencing debilitating anxiety, and those who needed to work odd hours and struggled to make it to and from the physical classroom space.

If the online space is a common accommodation, how do teachers make that virtual space full of humanness and connection? How do teachers make the space conducive to learning for students and teachers? The answer is that we tie the content, the concepts, and the theoretical to the human. We acknowledge the individuals in the space (no matter what that space looks or feels like). We share our own stories. We see each other as people, whether that be face-to-face, on a laptop screen, through hearing each other's voices and perspectives, and/or maybe asynchronously through audio responses, video exchanges, or through writing. We are mindful of the situated political economy of our institutions and the impact that has on our students'

lives and on the lives of our colleagues. We remember that education is always about the dialectical, the people, and the ideas. As Chaput puts it, "As individuals cultivate different intuitive responses to their environments, they revise the affect circulating through and orienting the world and its inhabitants. . . . Once altered, the unconscious attunements among individuals and their milieu open up the rhetorical field to a range of as yet unexplored possibilities" (160-61). As such, in academic settings individuals can call up the new possibilities that their students and colleagues present to them to integrate imaginative accommodations that work for all parties involved, led by the person in need of accommodations and thus supporting individuals during precarity or out of precarity. Instructional accommodations support this goal.

As for my own recent experience with accommodations, when I felt ready, I began to come into my campus office more often, and then I took on more committee work, attending more meetings in person (though, for various reasons, I often still prefer many of these types of meetings to be offered virtually or in hybrid formats). I took on more face-to-face teaching obligations, especially after I was fully vaccinated, but still cautiously until the Covid vaccines became available for ages. I slowly started taking my child to more and more childcare, which was also incredibly difficult to find for myself and, I imagine, for my colleagues and students in similar situations. I was fortunate because, for the most part, the process of moving away from accommodations was not fast and painful like ripping off a Band-Aid, but instead was a slow reentry as I felt increasingly able to do more outside of the home.

Even now as I am physically able to be in more places than I could peaceably achieve in previous times in my life, the tide has turned: the option of virtual meetings will continue. While some will continue to launch complaints about "Zoom fatigue," remember that people have been complaining about "meetings that could be emails" since long before the pandemic. Before we eagerly reassure each other that we want to be in person, that we want to get back to "normal," and that we are tired of "virtual living," remember that for many of us—some for our entire lives, others for portions, and for others still, just short blips in the overall scheme of things—these accommodations allow access to the spaces that would otherwise be difficult to achieve at best or completely inaccessible at worst. The newly ubiquitous accommodated classroom welcomes a greater multitude of the diverse people we work and live with; in enabling these spaces, we promote feminist, anti-racist, anti-ableist, anti-classist, and generally more inclusive accommodated classroom spaces that can help circumvent experiences of precarity.

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A Framework for Embracing Interdisciplinarity in the Context of Job-Readiness Imperatives in College Curricula

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When I was earning a BA in English literature in the late 1990s/early 2000s, I was among the first in my family who were fortunate enough to attend a four-year degree program. The sentiment in my social circles, therefore, was that I was extremely lucky to be able to go to college at all, and I should simply major in a subject in which I had some strengths. I began teaching in an inner-city Philadelphia elementary school in 2002 and taught my first college course in the fall of 2004 as a graduate teaching assistant. Since my teaching assignments were mainly in first-year writing, I had the pleasure of working with students from across campus and across the disciplines. In those early days of teaching, some students talked about majoring in things that were tied to specific careers, such as engineering or computer science. And while the cliché of the overqualified and underemployed barista was already a part of the popular imagination, and the Avenue Q "What do you do with a BA in English/It Sucks to be me" (Lopez & Marx 2003) song had come out the year before, there was still a sense that many people would major in things that they were passionate about—things they were good at—with the idea that having a degree at all would be the leg up they'd need to get a good job, or, at least, to set them on a path toward a fulfilling future career.

However, during and in the wake of the 2008 economic downturn, it was clear that more and more students were feeling the pressure to major in things that would unambiguously lead to lucrative, specific jobs in high demand areas right out of college. Now in 2024, the idea that you would go to college for something simply because you have a passion for it is widely considered a bohemian or fringe decision at best and an irresponsible one at worst. The intervening years have shown that the pressure to have direct-to-industry pipelines in academic programs is only set to increase. And even those programs who are paying attention to such

pressures are not immune to students' and their families' worries about employability; such pressures can unevenly be felt by our most vulnerable and socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Let me share a short anecdote to illustrate this point.

In 2014, I was in the second year of my first tenure-track position in an independent program in writing, rhetoric, and technical communication. Our program had strong and impressive job placement records, and our alumni had fulfilling and lucrative careers in which they quickly rose the ranks to senior roles, such as in project management. We also had a curriculum that was clearly meant to signal to internship providers and potential employers that our students would come right out of the gate with desirable job-readiness skills related to our field—such as web design, professional editing, and digital storytelling. Still, as a program with a highly academic-sounding word like "rhetoric" in the title, and as a program that was easily misunderstood as creative writing, we were not immune to the idea that our curriculum was a frivolous, self-indulgent waste of time.

As one of the primary instructors for the 200-level gateway-to-the-major course, I had the pleasure of interacting with a wide variety of majors and minors as they began their journeys in the program. In one section, I met a brilliant and dynamic young man whose parents had immigrated from Vietnam. He would be the first in his family to be fortunate enough to attend college, and his family pinned all their hopes on his future success. He was sweet, intellectually curious, and extremely creative. His writing and multimodal communication skills started out already strong; over the course of the term, they flourished. As I marveled over the strength of his projects in this early course, I was excited to see what he'd be producing by the end of his time with us. I also appreciated his calm, measured, thoughtful, and novel approach to discussing recalcitrant global problems. He seemed to be able to analyze and critique a wide range of issues with ease. It was clear that he not only was extremely well suited to our program, but also would thrive in it and find the experience enriching and pleasurable.

At the end of the semester, therefore, I was surprised when he came to my office to tell me that he needed to drop the major to take a nursing major. It was clear that he was very upset about this development. Confused, I asked him to sit down and made him a cup of tea. I asked him what had made him change his mind about our program for his major. He said that his parents told him that he was "not allowed to major in writing," and that he needed to position himself to be able to take care of them when they were older. In their minds, majoring in writing would not be the necessary path forward; they threatened to stop supporting him financially if he did not comply. What was clear from talking with him, though, was that the obligation to his family and a fear that they were right about the uselessness of a writing degree weighed on him even more heavily than the threat of being cut off did.

I pulled together a bunch of data from our alumni showing that they had good careers in which they were making enviable salaries and had achieved or showed great potential for growth. I asked him to share these things with his parents, but he said it wouldn't make a difference. For the next three years, this student would come into our building, which is not at all near where he was taking his classes. In fact, you'd need to literally cross over a highway to come to the writing building from the nursing one. He would sit in the hallways working on his nursing homework in misery. He would lament how difficult the work was for him, describe how he was afraid of the sight of blood and didn't like touching people, and express how much

he would rather be studying writing, rhetoric, and technical communication. I'd give him snacks and tea and say I was sorry. I suggested a writing minor, but, alas, his coursework was so difficult for him and, thus, so demanding of his time that he could not fit it in. While we have lost touch, I can only imagine that he is a nurse these days, and my hope is that maybe he's grown to like it or even love it. His story illustrates how even programs that are deeply engaged in the work of making the value of their curricula intelligible to diverse stakeholders struggle against the pressure on students to major in obviously career-focused subject areas.

What this anecdote also illustrates is something that those of us who work in higher education know well—such pressures are especially strong for our marginalized and socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and programs designed to recruit them to such majors are also ubiquitous. Chanda Prescod-Weinstein expresses this concern in a 2019 essay she wrote for *Inside Higher Ed* in which she cautions against not only the "kinds of social pressures" that are leading students to choose STEM majors and, thus, "to choose lives that may make them deeply unhappy," but also the ways that STEM fields are hostile to marginalized individuals (Prescod-Weinstein).

Concerns for these pressures on students pale in comparison, though, to the pressures on the humanities as we watch other programs get eviscerated or even eliminated in the name of efficiency and economic solvency—a phenomenon that has been widely documented and lamented in everything from elite journalism to blog entries to college newspapers (Hartocollis; Povich; Newfield; Keller). Scholars from across the disciplines are aware of the need to consider diverse 21st century and stakeholder exigencies in designing and rethinking college-level curricula (Kumar and Rewari). That said, there is great variation in how job readiness is interpreted (Winterton and Turner; Billett), and recent research suggests that only 25% of recent graduates would pursue the same degree programs if they were to do it over again (Massari). Many employers, moreover, lament that college graduates are deficient in soft skills, such as critical thinking, teamwork, speaking, and writing (Wilke; Kapareliotis et al.). Some researchers suggest that capstone courses and major projects are the way forward in the context of the challenges we face, and I don't disagree; meaningful capstone experiences, fully developed projects, practicums, internships, and other extra- and co-curricular experiences are immensely valuable (Muhammad et al.). Yet even at the level of individual courses, how can we build in the capacity to teach students to imagine specific career paths while also leaving room for the kinds of experiences that lead to soft skills that speak specifically to what employers are asking for in job ads?

Such is the current predicament those of us in higher education curriculum development face: how can we create curricula that allow for passionate exploration, play, and self-discovery—keys to the development of enlightened, judicious, and thoughtful citizens—and soft skills while also helping students to unambiguously see the future careers and selves they might inhabit? How can we teach courses that students, internship providers, and potential employers will interpret as valuable while also honoring students' rights to exploring areas of interest for their own sake? Such questions encapsulate the fraught state of higher education and key anxieties about poverty, real and imagined. What is at the heart of these STEM, business, and computer science major imperatives, then, is the fear of going to all the trouble

and expense of college or sacrificing greatly such that your child can do so only to remain just as poor or even worse off.

Once reserved for the wealthy elite, the 1944 Serviceman's Readjustment Act, better known as the GI Bill of Rights, opened up higher education for more and more Americans than ever before. The Higher Education Act of 1965 further increased access to colleges and universities for groups who'd previously been excluded. Yet the 1970s ushered in waning public investment in higher education, the rise of reliance on student loans, and more and more financial burdens placed on students and their families in the form of constantly rising tuition and fees.

At the same time, from the 1980s onward, the need for a college degree to obtain employment became increasingly urgent. Each decade since, college has become more and more expensive, reliance on loans has increased, and the idea that going to college is a "must" has become deeply entrenched in our cultural script. And while at one time having a college degree, being what my mother-in-law refers to as a "college graduate"—something she herself never had the opportunity to be—was the goal regardless of major, now there is pressure to have a degree in a precisely defined field of study with a clear path to a lucrative position right out of school. The logic goes that if you cannot draw a neat line between what you are studying and the job you will do, you are wasting your time, you are risking your family's future, and you are being irresponsible. Of course, should you be fortunate enough to "come from money," the boundaries around what you can study are very different. The consequence of these logics is to render humanities, arts, and even to some extent social sciences either out-of-touch, elite endeavors or irrelevant wastes of time.

As a consequence, those researching, writing, and teaching in humanities departments and disciplines are living in highly fraught times. In September of 2023, West Virginia University joined the increasing ranks of institutions who've gutted the liberal arts, a move that many have interpreted as inherently classist as the wide swath of students served by this flagship institution will no longer have access to a range of liberal arts courses and programs—epistemological vantage points associated with the educated elite, with self-exploration, and with the capacity for deep and meaningful thinking.

Such trends speak poignantly to the existential threats the academy faces in the context of late capitalism and attendant climate instability, corporate influences on political and social life, and increasing injustices. Among other concerns with these changes is the fear that the very nature of US higher education is shifting; colleges and universities are less and less places where profound, creative thought and epistemic change are possible and more and more places where rote job skills are learned and where vocational training is offered. In an April 2023 *New York Times* piece, ancient historian and teaching assistant professor at North Carolina State University Bret C. Devereaux relatedly opined:

> The steady disinvestment in the liberal arts risks turning America's universities into vocational schools narrowly focused on professional training. Increasingly, they have robust programs in subjects like business, nursing and computer science but less and less funding for and focus on departments of history, literature, philosophy, mathematics and theology.

In a piece published in *The Wall Street Journal* a few weeks prior to Devereaux's essay, St. John's University Legal Studies student Danielle Zito (2023) commented provocatively

that the "liberal arts are dead," and, after citing daunting statistics that show precipitous declines in the numbers of humanities majors in recent decades, she argued that "college students are looking for a strong return on investment," and that it is "not there with liberal arts"(Zito). While Zito acknowledged that the liberal arts create "well-rounded people"—a bland understatement— she blames the so-called illiberal left and their propensity toward the study of DEI and Marxist indoctrination for the decline. Such tiresome arguments are dauntingly present in a wide variety of right-leaning rhetorics.

Among the many arguments marshalled in favor of cuts to liberal arts programs is the idea that as obtaining an education at a college or university becomes more and more expensive, students need to see clear paths to future careers. If they do not, they run the risk of not being able to, among other things, take on the daunting task of paying off their extensive student loan debts. This sentiment alongside the "caricature of the college educated barista" mentioned earlier are powerful representations of collective anxieties, and they are most frequently associated with those graduates who hold liberal arts degrees (Thomposon, 2016). The fear, then, is that studying certain things in college will leave you poor and in debt—worse off than if you had never gone.

While these fears are overstated, it's hard to discredit them entirely. College is more expensive than it has ever been, and rises in tuition costs show no signs of abating. While students and their families invest and borrow more and more money to go to school, they want to know that there will be a job at the end of their program. The connection to student poverty is twofold—there is the actual financial sacrifice made to obtain a college education and then there is the fear of poverty that looms large for those who are not in highly specific majors—a fear that is necessarily more intense for students that do not have financial safety nets in the form of family money.

For those of us in curriculum development in the liberal arts, the pressure to produce curricula that is hyper-focused on helping students find meaningful and lucrative employment such that the enormous financial and material sacrifices they are making "pay off" is enormous. Yet, as Sarah Wasserman (2023) lamented, there is something lost in not also encouraging students to study what they love, not telling them to follow their passions and bliss, and not insisting that we all acknowledge the truth that many do not end up in positions that map specifically to their courses of study in college (Wasserman).

As I describe above, I was a first-generation college student who studied English literature in the late 1990s/early 2000s, and I did so because I loved it. By the time I graduated, I was pregnant, broke, and in student-loan debt. I felt completely unprepared to figure out how to get a job, yet I did know that I gained a lot from my liberal arts degree. While I was fortunate enough to get a position at an under-resourced elementary school in Philadelphia for two years before pursuing graduate school, my salary was 24k a year, and I was supporting a family of three. Thus, I feel the tension of this problem acutely. How can we retain the sense of wonder, passion, and fulfillment of education for its own sake while making sure students see a way out of poverty, the leg up that is implicitly promised, or, at the very least, see college as a prospect that will not leave them poor and unemployable? How can we create curricula that combines creativity and passion with job-readiness skills? Is it possible?

In this essay, I attempt to answer this question by presenting a framework that seeks to guide the creation of such curricula. This framework involves:

- Embracing interdisciplinarity
- Leaving ample room for play, vulnerability, exploration, and self-discovery
- Including opportunities for reflections on a wide variety of potential futures
- Having clear, career-oriented student learning outcomes (SLOs) that map onto current job ads and follow key industry trends

In what follows, I explicate each of these features and offer readers guiding questions to ask if they'd like to explore the possibilities therein. To illustrate this framework, I also offer the example of two courses that follow its features: "Writing in the Health Sciences" and "Writing as a Way of Healing"—two interdisciplinary courses I have developed at my home institution in the English department. In these classes, I help students to imagine a wide variety of future careers while also leaving them space to be exploratory, to discover new passions, and to imagine more than one version of their future selves. Courses like these, I argue, have a shot at helping students to consider the kinds of jobs they might fill while also retaining learning for its own sake.

Embracing interdisciplinarity

For the purposes of this essay, I operationalize interdisciplinarity as the blending of more than one discipline in the pursuit of new knowledge. While it's beyond the scope of the current argument, it is worth parsing varying and contested definitions of this term and the related terms "multidisciplinarity" in which fields contribute their own independently developed ideas or products to a larger team and "transdisciplinarity" in which traditional disciplinary boundaries are transcended and people work together across disciplinary lines at all stages of a problem, a design sprint, or pursuit.

In the framework I'm delineating here, the idea is that more than one field of study can be blended in the creation of a course that fits squarely within the humanities, yet makes it clear how and where it is relevant beyond humanistic epistemologies and methodologies. That is, I see interdisciplinarity in the context of humanistic course design as an imperative to carefully and strategically signpost how and where the issues and problems that animate the creation of a course to begin with are best illuminated via humanistic lenses. Yet such courses should also make it clear that finding innovative inquiries and creative solutions within humanist frameworks also requires attention to other disciplinary vantages. Doing so requires pointing out explicitly how and where other fields of study and the basic epistemological assumptions on which they rest, intersect with, complicate, and enrich such inquiries and solutions. It is a way of approaching course design that insists on humanist vantage points that are steeped in the deep appreciation for other ways of knowing and pragmatic approaches to engaging with such diverse epistemologies.

For example, for this term (spring 2024), I used my research background in the rhetoric of health and medicine and writing in the health sciences to design a "Writing as a Way of Healing" course under the auspices of an existing course—ENG 301: Advanced Writing—at

the mid-sized, R1 state university where I work. As the description below makes clear, the class is explicitly interdisciplinary. It draws on several disciplines to consider a central set of questions that are of concern to the humanities in general and to writing studies specifically:

> In this class, we will explore writing as a way of healing—an interdisciplinary movement that spans the humanities, social sciences, and hard sciences. While some have theorized expressive writing as capable of healing a wide variety of physical and emotional ailments, others have cautioned that encouraging self-discourse of painful memories is deeply problematic, voyeuristic, and can lead to retraumatization. Our inquiries will lead us to consider the implications of therapeutic methods, pedagogical approaches, and advocacy work that rely on individuals testifying to trauma experiences in narrative arcs—on individuals "telling their stories"—in order to determine: a) whether or not the traction gained for related causes are adequately weighed against potential psychic distress and vulnerability incurred by speakers themselves; b) whether or not these points of departure for writers and thinkers lead to responsible and judicious citizenship and strong ethos; and c) whether or not there is a relationship between speakers' demographic information/social capital and the likelihood that they will experience/succumb to an invitation or imperatives to disclose. In other words, we'll take up questions like: Who is asked to disclose, in what contexts, for what purposes? and Who is the audience of these disclosures, what does the speaker gain or lose through these procedures; what do audiences gain or lose through these disclosures? and how do personal narrative disclosure arcs hold up to complex nonlinear realities?

This class is meant to convey to a wide audience of students that they can gain an understanding of a complex problem from a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives. The title, too, is meant to signal to potential employers and internship providers that students have learned specific genres and skills that can be ported into the workplace. Implicitly, there is an indication that regardless of their professional aspirations, they will be able to find relevance in the discussions we have. In this class, moreover, I emphasize the real-world contexts in which such knowledge of the promises and pitfalls of writing as a way of healing might be relevant. For those going into social work, psychology, and teaching at any level, of course, the connections are clear. Yet our discussions in this class also veer into the territory of how valuable it can be to think about whether or not to disclose your own past to potential audiences in a wide variety of contexts, such as workplace settings. We discuss how disclosure—particularly of trauma experiences—has political dimensions that are worth parsing. In one of their major projects, students work with a small group of their peers to host a "writing as healing" workshop at a local community center, mental health support space, or senior center. This workshop gives them a specific instance of client work to discuss in interviews later on.

This class also allows for the kind of intellectual curiosity and learning for its own sake that has long been a luxury in humanities frameworks yet has also come under scrutiny when students need to make difficult decisions on how to spend their time in college (e.g., to maximize their investment of time and money). This is a class in which students can articulate how they might put the new knowledge they gain to use and have space for creativity.

When approaching the creation of a course, here are some guiding questions through which to similarly build out interdisciplinary potential:

1. What are the central questions I want to explore with my students?

2. What problems does my course explore?
3. What other disciplinary lenses could be useful in examining these questions and problems?

Asking these questions might lead to a list of other disciplines from which you can draw inspiration, readings, screenings, texts, and assignments to enrich course design in the humanities. Doing so will make describing the value of such classes to diverse stakeholders more feasible.

Leaving Ample Room for Play, Vulnerability, Exploration, and Self-Discovery

Even as a course embraces interdisciplinarity, room should be left for students to play around with ideas, to try out vulnerable positions in a safe space, to explore and interrogate their own thinking, to discover more about who they are and, more importantly, who they want to be.

An assignment in my writing-as-a-way-of-healing class encapsulates these ideas well. In it, I ask students to do follow the prompt below:

Project One—Dismantling Narrative Arcs Project with Presentation

The Basics:

In very plain language, this project asks you to tell a story about your life—one, perhaps, that reiterates some event or symbolically represents some aspect of your life from which you wish to heal. However, instead of telling us a neat story about what happened and how it felt, and instead of offering an anecdote the illustrates the issue, you'll create a meaningful and engaging assemblage of images, sound, and voiceover to share with the group.

The Aim:

Writing studies scholars have cautioned against using writing prompts that are meant to heal writers as such prompts can be, as Lynn Worsham explained "resolutely tied to liberal humanist notions of self, agency, and authentic self-expression" (177). Yet, as we also know, various empirical studies in the hard and social sciences do note a connection between writing and healing a wide variety of physical and mental ailments. Still, what Worsham is concerned about is "narrative fetishism," which "refers to the construction of a narrative that is consciously or unconsciously designed to purge the traces of the trauma that calls the narrative into being in the first place" (178). Writing as healing is often taken up in a way that suggests *narration* as the way to address the underlying *trauma* from which one might hope to heal. Worsham wants us to think critically about narratives and the tendency for narrative fetishism to push up against storytelling and complicate its supposedly social role in knowledge creation. Critical questions emerge:

- Do narratives intended to heal actually cause narcissism?
- Are such narratives merely self-indulgent?
- Do narratives intended to heal help writers avoid the difficult work involved in addressing their emotional problems—their "problems with living"?

- And, as Janice Carello and Lisa Butler argue, can such narratives lead to retraumatization?

Certainly, many things we'll read and screen this term will make compelling arguments for writing's potential to heal what ails; however, I want us to start out with some skepticism about narratives to enrich our conversations and your projects. Part of the issue with narrative, to my mind, is the fact that most people associate them with linear arcs. Even the rise of experimental works in fields like creative nonfiction did little to stem the tide of neat narrative arcs. Fitting an account into an arc, of course, can be pleasurable—especially for those of us accustomed to consuming other narratives that follow similar patterns and employ analogous tropes. Still, it is important to think analytically about how an arc might press what we might call a *hermeneutic imperative* and *rigid form* onto an account of the self and one's life events (let's call this a template of sorts that demands specific dispositions toward events and particular interpretations of these events).

Within this rich framing, your work on this project begins. I am asking you to push back against narrative arcs—to dismantle them—and to explore the possibilities for giving an account of your life in a nonlinear and more capacious manner. Your project will emerge in fits and starts and will conceal as much as it reveals. You'll craft and curate a collection of sounds, images, text, and video to symbolically recast some issue or event from which you wish to heal. Your project, which you'll present to the rest of us, will keep us all intrigued and guessing. It will allow you to reveal only as much of your personal life as you wish.

Invention: To get started, ask yourself:

- What are some painful things I've experienced that I wish to heal from?
- If I had to convey those experiences without telling the story in a narrative arc, how would I do that?
    - What images, soundbites, video clips, animations, or words would symbolically recast my story?
    - How can I reveal only what I'm comfortable sharing while still getting the benefit of composing as a way of healing?

Rubric:

This project is entirely an experiment and will not be graded harshly. However, to give you an idea of how I'll grade you, here is a brief and flexible rubric:

Writer uses some combination of sound, image, text, and video to create a meaningful assemblage.	(10)
Presentation is approximately 5 to 10 minutes-worth of material and is clearly polished and ready for an audience.	(10)
Total:	(20)

Please feel free to visit office hours or to make an appointment if you wish for me to review your project in advance of the due date.

Have fun with this assignment!

I am really looking forward to seeing and hearing what you come up with.

As the design of this project shows, students are asked to engage in fairly advanced, abstract, intellectual work. The entire notion of symbolically recasting puts them in a space of exploration that is part and parcel of humanistic study. They are invited into the possibility of passionate, creative, intellectual thought and analysis; they are able to indulge in self-exploration at what is usually a key point in their development as young adults.

Moreover, the fact that the project is multimodal often means that students play around with multimodal design tools and programs—skills and experiences they can later share as assets with internship providers and potential employers. Also key to this assignment's success is the fact that students in the class share their projects with each other—an exercise that I have seen lead to empathy-building, mutual respect, and diplomatic communication.

For those interested in using assignments that similarly invite play, vulnerability, exploration, and self-discovery, the following questions might be generative:

1. How can I invite my students to think with me on the complex issues, topics, and problems my course takes up?
2. What kinds of prompts will allow my students to think critically about their own relationships to this topic?
3. How can I allow for a wide variety of interpretations of this assignment such that all students, regardless of background, see a place for themselves in what is being asked?
4. What kinds of tools do I want my students to feel invited to try out?

Asking these questions could lead to assignment prompts that allow students the space to engage in the deeply creative and intellectual work that often feels like it is missing when there is too much emphasis on "job readiness," yet the use of multimodal tools and the complexity of building their digital projects does speak to job readiness all the same.

Including Opportunities for Reflections on a Wide Variety of Potential Futures

It is also important to design some courses that really spell out precisely what a student can gain professionally from taking them. With the goal of offering students an explicit indication of what they'll get out of a class professionally, I designed a course called "Writing in the Health Sciences" under the course title "English 222: Introduction to Professional Writing." So that students in various disciplines and with a variety of career goals can see a place for themselves in the course, I describe it thus:

> There are a wide variety of writing and research-related tasks that those in the health professions (conceived broadly) might undertake, such as, preparing healthcare records, evidence-based reports, and patient-education materials. While those who write in healthcare contexts do so for a variety of audiences, purposes, and occasions, all medical writing should be clear, up to date, correct, and culturally appropriate. This course will overview professional writing best practices through a focus on professional writing in health and medical contexts. This class is suited to a wide variety of students:

> students in English studies will have a better sense of potential careers and genres in medical writing and medical editing while students in health sciences will have a stronger sense of the kinds of writing they might undertake in their careers.

Using industry standards from professional organizations like the American Medical Writer's Association (AMWA) and exploring a wide variety of career options in health advocacy, public health, medical writing, and medical editing, this class also speaks directly to those going into clinical professions by overviewing the kinds of writing and communication they can expect to do in their careers.

In this class, I design lessons that constantly vacillate between thinking about the student audience as future clinicians versus thinking of them as people who are considering a range of health-communications-related career paths. Rather than this duality creating dissonance, it keeps the tone of the course career-focused yet open to a host of possible futures. For students who are in English, communication, or similar fields, I find that speaking explicitly about career paths gets them thinking about what they might want to do, even if that career is not related to health communication. For those who have always envisioned themselves as going into clinical work, I find that some of them start to rethink the kinds of contributions they might make to the worlds of health and medicine beyond becoming nurses, doctors, physician's assistants, etc. For both groups, the course content empowers them to see a wide array of possibilities for themselves in the future—options that go beyond the title of their academic majors, prospects that speak to their interests and passions and strengths.

Others interested in similarly designing courses that have practical professional applications for a wide range of students—ones with the capacity to inspire students to think about the variety of things they could do with their lives—might ask themselves the following questions:

1. What different kinds of careers might my class prepare students to take on?
2. What are 3 to 5 majors on campus who might find my course useful as they prepare for their future careers?
3. What are specific genres of professional writing that are relevant to my areas of expertise?

Asking these questions could help to clarify the kinds of courses that help students to imagine and envision a range of potential futures for themselves in ways that go beyond obvious options—courses that help them to see that they could apply for entry-level positions in a wide variety of industries and professions.

Having Clear, Career-Oriented Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) that Map onto Current Job Ads and Follow Key Industry Trends

In thinking through how we can create curricula that are responsive to job-readiness imperatives while also retaining all that is worthwhile in higher education beyond job training, such as the possibility for passionate exploration, play, and self-discovery—keys, as I argue above, to the development of an enlightened, judicious, and thoughtful citizen—it is important to think about learning outcomes that will clearly communicate such values. It is essential to have intentionally clear, career-oriented student learning outcomes (SLOs) that map onto

current job ads and follow key industry trends so that students themselves can see the value in the courses. If students recognize the relationship between their courses and their future careers, they will be better able to articulate those connections.

For my writing in the health sciences course, the learning outcomes include the following:

- Examine conventions in professional writing genres.
- Compose professional texts across modes, audiences, and purposes.
- Exhibit rhetorical awareness and cultural competence when composing in professional writing genres.

Naturally, writing SLOs is an answer to the question: what do I want my students to be able to do or produce after they've taken this course? Having clear, assessable end goals helps to give shape to a worthwhile, meaningful course. That said, it is also helpful to think of SLOs as places to signal job-readiness skills that will be part of the course. Considering what job ads are asking for and the keywords potential employers are using can be a powerful way to signal that the course you are teaching is meant to prepare students specifically for jobs. Moreover, even the course title itself can do the work of communicating job-centric content in the courses we teach.

Those interested in similarly composing SLOs that are career-oriented, map onto current job ads, and follow key industry trends should ask the following:

1. What kinds of jobs are recent alums getting? What are their titles? What do they do in their day-to-day lives?
2. Reading through job ads that are related to the courses you teach, what are keywords you notice? What skills do employers want to see, and how are those skills articulated?
3. What are specific things you want your students to be able to do or produce at the end of your course?

Asking these questions might ensure that the SLOs will tell a compelling story of how what students do and learn in your course helps them to be prepared to take on new opportunities beyond college.

Conclusion

In the *Avenue Q* song (Lopez & Marx 2003) I referenced in the opening of this essay, the lyrics are as follows:

> Four years of college
>
> And plenty of knowledge
>
> Have earned me this useless degree!
>
> I can't pay the bills yet
>
> 'Cause I have no skills yet

The world is a big scary place!

But somehow I can't shake

The feeling I might make

A difference to the human race!

And while this song is meant to be humorous, it resonates with the issues and problems with which I have grappled in this piece. How can we inspire students to think creatively, openly, and critically—to engage with the most challenging facets of life in the context of late capitalism, toxic political rhetorics, climate change, and ever-increasing global injustices and conflicts while also helping them to see specific jobs they could qualify for and career paths they might follow? Students need the "plenty of knowledge" and the habits of mind that are earned through deep engagement with humanistic and social scientific fields, yet they also need those "skills" that will help them to "pay the bills."

The son of a Philadelphia union carpenter and first-generation American, my dad was not able to attend a four-year-degree program. He started working as a young teen to help support his nine siblings, he became a father when he was 19, and he was the father of four by the time he was 25. As a baby boomer, though, he was still part of a generation that could, with the right mix of intelligence, luck, and tenacity, pull themselves up by the proverbially bootstraps. Once a trackman for Amtrak, he is now in upper management at an engineering firm that specializes in rail transportation systems. He recently shared that a bright, young female engineer from India he is working with was asking about his children. When he shared that one is a writing professor, another a singer/songwriter, and another a film professor, she immediately commented on how her parents would never have let her major in such frivolous things.

Those of us tasked with telling compelling stories about the career trajectories our humanities and social sciences degree programs make possible have an uphill battle when it comes to dispelling the myth that the only way to get a reliable and upwardly mobile career is to go into a STEM, business, or health sciences programs and that other paths are indulgent wastes of time or experiences that are reserved for those with hefty financial safety nets. The pressure on our most vulnerable students to major in STEM and health careers is only going to increase. Moreover, the very viability of the humanities and social sciences is at risk with the increasingly draconian budget cuts that so many of our institutions face. If we are to survive these daunting times, we must find better ways to tell stories about what our programs specifically train people to do. We need to create curricula that map onto specific skillsets that employers are seeking. And, most challengingly, we need to do these things while retaining the capacity for the intellectual curiously, passion, and joy that brought so many of us to study in such fields to begin with. Attending to these complex tasks will require a lot of thought, mindful preparation, and experimentation. A framework like the one I have described in this essay is a starting point. If such a framework were to drive curriculum development in the humanities and social sciences moving forward, perhaps students like the Vietnamese-American student I describe above would be able to articulate the pragmatic payoffs of our programs. The relevant and specific skills gained, the potential for employability, and the

possibility of emerging from poverty would be more obvious. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to work in such programs for many years have seen the robust career trajectories of our alumni as their skills and habits of mind help them to quickly and impressively become successful leaders in a wide variety of industries. Making such pathways more legible in curriculum design would allow even more students to thrive materially and professionally.

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The Path Ahead for Recent PhDs

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The Interviewees

We conducted 60-minute interviews with 30 of the 93 recent PhD graduates we contacted from 7 doctoral programs (including 5 in large research universities).[1]

- 10 graduated during the pandemic: 5 in 2021, 5 in 2020, 6 in 2019, 4 in 2018, 5 in 2017, and 5 in 2016.
- 21 are tenure-track assistant professors, 3 are nontenure-track faculty, 3 academic staff (including 2 who teach part time), and 3 non-academics (including 2 who had been NT faculty).
- 7 TT faculty are not in "English" or English-only departments, and 2 were helping to create new departments.

[1] For permission to cite this research, please email the authors.

- All specialize in writing studies and related areas (with 1 in English ed. and 2 in technical communications).
- 7 of the tenure-track faculty serve as WPAs and in other formal administrative roles, and the 3 staff also have administrative duties.
- 11 work in Doctoral Very High Research universities, 4 in Doctoral High Research, 1 in Doctoral/Professional, 7 in Masters, 2 in Baccalaureate, and 2 in community colleges.
- 16 are women, and 2 are African American, 2 Asian American, 3 Hispanic, and 23 White Non-Hispanic. We did not ask for information on sexual orientation.

The Interviews

"A family-friendly policy that's friendliest to male professors"

Almost half of our interviewees experienced the worst job market in recorded history, including several who graduated before the pandemic and conducted job searches in subsequent years. All of the interviewees have launched their careers amidst the deepest disruptions in higher education since WWII. In our summaries of the interviews, we attempted to characterize the interviewees' perspectives without belaboring the stress and burnout they experienced because these concerns have been well documented in the research cited at the end of this report.

We framed these discussions with questions about leadership because early-career faculty face historic leadership challenges—and opportunities. Many English departments have struggled to sustain day-to-day operations with declining support and futures obscured by the ongoing impact of pandemic. Many of our interviewees have had to step up to fill the leadership gaps created by the rising retirements of senior faculty, the lack of faculty with the expertise to develop and teach professional and other writing majors, and the challenges of sustaining writing programs that often include large numbers of teaching assistants and recently hired and part-time instructors. One third of the new assistant professors we interviewed had taken on administrative leadership roles, and others recounted how they had stepped up to support students and coworkers through the pandemic, including helping with transitioning teaching to online.

In these and other roles, early-career faculty are stepping into the leadership challenges of helping English departments adapt to the institutional, economic, and demographic changes that have become powerfully apparent with pandemic-related changes in the educational and social environments of higher education.

1. How do you understand leadership? What do you look for in leaders?

Like most faculty, our interviewees initially presumed that questions about "leaders" referred to heads and other administrators, but some immediately acknowledged that those not in designated leadership positions could also serve as leaders. Some defined leaders as collaborators who step up to help a group get things done, as they were doing in their

departments. Virtually all the discussions identified effective leadership with listening and supporting coworkers, and many characterized weak leaders as those who avoided conflicts, lacked transparency, and were more intent on their own purposes. Many interviewees noted that good leaders had made efforts to consider the human impact of the pandemic, while unresponsive leaders had not adequately prioritized the well-being of students and faculty.

2. How has the pandemic impacted you and your coworkers?

As one would expect, interviewees reported feeling isolated and overworked, but some noted that working from home had shielded them from the worst aspects of the pandemic. Mothers with young children struggled, and those struggles prompted reassessments of career aspirations. Many interviewees praised coworkers and departments for how they managed the transition to online, though many also observed that senior colleagues had needed help with adapting.

3. What do you see as the lasting impact of the pandemic?

There was a collective hope that all the stress and burnout would encourage the prioritization of mental health and work-life balance in an ongoing way. Many interviews also noted how attention to accessibility skyrocketed with the move to online teaching and remote work. The increased emphasis on accessibility and working from home were seen as lasting changes with positive benefits, though the loss of community was also a concern. While interviewees were also concerned about encroaching business interests, several saw the impact of technology as a source of innovation. Such mixed assessments are consistent with Dumont et al., "The effect of the COVID pandemic on faculty adoption of online teaching," *Cogent Education*, 2021.

4. How effectively is your department responding to the leadership challenges it is facing?

Our discussions of this question often focused on how early-career faculty had to find their place in departments that were struggling with leadership challenges, including generational divisions (which were cited by one third of the faculty we spoke with). Several interviewees related these internal tensions to faculty anxieties that English departments were losing support, while others expressed hope that much more could be done to better articulate the contributions of their departments and programs if faculty worked together to adapt to the changes they faced. Virtually all who worked outside of English departments reported fewer such challenges.

5. Are your coworkers discussing revising curricula to increase enrollments?

Many interviewees reported that their departments were discussing how to respond to the enrollment declines that have led almost 90% of English departments to revise their majors according to the MLA's "A Changing Major" (2018). Interviewees reviewed curricular

reforms aimed at creating more "broadly applicable" majors with fewer prerequisites and period-based literature courses. Several noted the rising popularity of professional writing majors. Virtually all the respondents adopted a pragmatic stance concerned with adapting programs to improve student recruitment and support.

6. Is your department making efforts to address social justice and anti-racist concerns?

These issues were a major priority of almost all interviewees. Some reported they had joined with students and faculty across campus to press for more attention to BLM and related issues. Social justice came up in many discussions of interviewees' leadership outside of their own teaching and mentoring. Several faculty of color and other respondents noted that such service efforts had increased their workloads.

7. Is your department treating NT instructors fairly? Are they included in deliberations on these issues?

Our interviewees included a lecturer, instructor, nontenure-track professor, and others who had worked in such roles in writing programs before leaving the academy or transitioning to TT positions. Two staff taught in part-time positions. Some TT interviewees did not have much contact with NT coworkers. Those who did expressed concerns about working conditions while some also reported that NT faculty were voting members of their departments. Our NT interviewees seemed to be more involved in their programs than in their departments.

8. How effectively is your department articulating its contributions and priorities going forward?

We had several generative conversations about "the deep irony" that faculty in English departments "specialize in communication" and yet often do not effectively communicate their contributions to their universities. Our interviewees who worked outside English departments were particularly critical of how English departments position themselves. Several interviewees cited examples where effective leaders had helped their departments develop proactive and innovative ways to strengthen their positions, for example by developing interdisciplinary and community partnerships.

9. How well did your grad program prepare you to address the challenges you're facing?

Our participants noted that "nothing could truly prepare them" for the global challenges they are facing. No one cited graduate courses that were directly applicable. Discussions focused instead on the mentors who helped them understand how higher education works and TA leadership roles in writing programs and centers that involved them in that work. Some also responded by looking beyond their graduate studies to talk about how their leadership had been shaped by teaching in schools, labor organizing, and working in businesses and nonprofits.

10. Given these challenges, how do you see your own leadership? Is leadership part of what you teach?

Many respondents who were not in designated leadership roles were initially hesitant to identify themselves as leaders. Those who did generally focused on their teaching as the primary area where they served as leaders. Interviewees shared inspiring examples of how they

created collaborative classrooms in which they served as a "guide on the side" to empower students. Several cited classes focused on advocacy and leadership, and others identified the teaching of rhetoric as implicitly concerned with teaching leadership. When we introduced our focus on coalitional leadership, virtually all interviewees welcomed that frame and used it to articulate their own leadership contributions in a more unified way.

1. How do you understand leadership? What do you look for in leaders?

When asked about leadership in the academy, most interviewees initially focused on heads, WPAs, and other administrators. Early-career faculty understandably looked to such leaders to clarify expectations, defend their departments, and provide needed support. Some interviewees opened with expansive views of leadership that looked past the common tendency to identify administrators as leaders. When respondents spoke about themselves as leaders, they mostly focused on their teaching, which was pivotal to our discussions of more expansive views of leadership. Interviewees also cited their collaborations with "peer leaders" or "leading from behind." Over the course of the interviews, most respondents shifted back and forth between these more distributed and hierarchical views of leadership.

In response to such views, we directly asked respondents whether one had to be in a position of power to be a leader. When asked, interviewees recognized that the tendency to look to administrators for leadership devalued faculty members' collaborative leadership. In addition to talking about their teaching, interviewees talked about the importance of "horizontal approaches" to collaborative leadership, for example in building coalitions and in distributed forms of leadership such as serving on committees. Many interviewees cited examples from their work in writing centers, community partnerships, collaborative research, and social-justice coalitions and labor unions.

Twelve interviewees cited labor union organizing as an example of what one termed "grassroots community-based leadership." A few noted how they had become involved in unionizing as teachers and TAs, and others noted union efforts to respond to administrators' failures to prioritize health protections, working conditions, and social justice issues. Several respondents noted that English department TAs and faculty had played leading roles in building campus-wide-coalitions to address such issues.

In various ways, respondents distinguished between "authoritarian" and "authoritative" leaders who are transparent and good sources of institutional knowledge and yet ready to learn from their colleagues and be decisive when needed. Interviewees noted that collaborators have to step

> *When I first got here, I didn't feel like a leader because. . .I didn't have, a particular position that kind of designated me as a leader. . . .. Even though I know that . . .* [my work with] *students in the classroom. . .is a form of leadership, for sure. But the way I teach, I don't think of myself like that, I guess I think of myself as like a co-participant in this learning process. But this year, I definitely feel more like I am in like a designated leadership role as the director of composition. . . . I'm in charge of training all of our TAs . . ., and I lead our preceptorship. And, you know, offer other forms of support, like professional development days, and things like that.*

up "in certain situations where the need for a leader arises." Other interviewees noted the limitations of a collaborative vision of leadership: "too much horizontally can be chaos," and "groupthink" can lead to indecisive discussion loops that do not get groups anywhere.

Good Leadership: Interviewees focused on the importance of communications (especially listening), humility, collaboration, transparency, empathy, democracy, accountability, and trust in discussing effective leaders. Many of these qualities were mentioned together. For example, the skill of listening was highly correlated with other qualities. One instructive example of this skill bundling came from a participant who used Carol Dweck's concept of "growth mindset" to sketch the relations between humility, listening, and collaboration: leaders need to have a "growth mindset" because "humility is so important" in "really listening to others and being in relation to them, instead of seeing you're the expert."

Effective leaders advocate for their departments to secure vital resources and help their colleagues understand institutional priorities and constraints.

They are attentive to the needs of their collaborators and do not just focus on getting business done or seek the prestige of being the boss: "Everyone wants to be at the mic, you know, the bullhorn." Other qualities that were most cited were humanity and a compassionate concern for supporting coworkers in ways that earn their trust.

Because leaders are attuned to the needs of those they represent, they can anticipate and address tensions before they build to a crisis. Effective leaders proactively address conflicts rather than just react to them.

Bad Leadership: Less effective leaders were characterized as conflict averse, indecisive, and self-servingly guided by their own presumptions and ambitions. Instead of engaging in dialogues over issues, they offer "pretend choices" because they've already made up their minds. Several respondents noted that less effective leaders, like less effective teachers, may pretend everything is open for discussion while expectations and criteria are already set.

Interviewees recognized that ineffective and effective leadership is distinguished not just by the qualities of individual leaders but also by the institutional contexts and interpersonal histories that shape the constraints and expectations

> *Positive leaders. . .are genuinely interested in listening, not just like checking a box. We're not just, you know, trying to, like get this done by a certain time, but we're really trying to listen. . . . And I think, for me, my positive experiences have been when I'm mostly working with students and genuinely trying to listen to what they say. And then when I haven't been such a great leader, . . .I find myself saying, like, we tried that a few years ago, and it didn't work. . . . So I guess. . .*[listening is what] *makes a good leader. . .first and foremost,. . .listening,* [with] *intentionality. So really like not having an idea in your mind of what's going to work. I've been part of groups, where we do have like a leader who's been here a while and feels like they've got it figured out. And that's just never a good recipe.*

that leaders work with. In many interviews, individuals shifted from discussing individual leaders to discussing institutional hierarchies and patterns of interaction and deliberation.

A case study in how to build collaborative leadership capacity was provided by an interviewee who worked in a not-for-profit after leaving a lectureship in a large impersonal writing program. The writing program did not involve or even inform her about basic operations, for example by providing a new faculty orientation. In sharp contrast, her nonprofit used "Sociocratic" methods of collaborative decision-making to alleviate problems with transparency, leadership, and a lack of ownership:

> Sociocracy . . . is an effort to self-organize and allow individuals to have more autonomy over their work. And so it makes an effort to really kind of like, make clear who owns what decisions and then who within certain teams should connect with or consult with other teams. And it really tries to codify decision-making power.

The interviewee praised how this collaborative leadership philosophy demystified collaborative situations:

> Like, are we trying to create a proposal, or are we trying to make a decision? . . . [This methodology helps us] get clear about what we're trying to do together. And then the big one is that decision-making within each team and within the organization overall is done through consent. So it's not consensus. . . If somebody does not consent to it, then it does not move forward until we figure out or resolve that issue. . . .

This model of collaborative leadership stood in stark contrast to the experiences of other early-career faculty. The interviews included harrowing accounts of dysfunctional department meetings in which bickering and an inability to develop strategic plans incapacitated collaborative leadership. Such challenges were sometimes blamed on ineffective heads, but the descriptions also highlighted how departments have become stressed over how to address declining enrollments, funding, and TT hiring.

2. How has the pandemic impacted you and your coworkers?

Searching for jobs and struggling to find a place in locked-down departments brought overwhelming stress and anxiety to many of the early-career faculty we interviewed. Those formative experiences impacted their career goals, their assessments of their own work, and their perceptions of the academic communities they watched at work in Zoom meetings. The survey research cited at the end of this report reviews the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on early-career faculty and staff who are women, parents of young children, untenured, and part-timers. Studies have also identified minority faculty and staff as more impacted because of their disproportionately impacted communities.

Six of the twelve respondents who talked about their job searches in the pandemic reflected on the impact of that experience on their career goals. Five had just graduated from PhD programs. One respondent who had landed a lectureship position and then was let go during the pandemic reported feeling suicidal over having to go through another academic job search. Another participant described experiencing multiple "mental breakdowns" throughout her job search, which she characterized as the hardest experience in her life.

The pandemic also had differing impacts depending on the politics of the interviewees' state and whether they worked in smaller institutions, community colleges, or more residential universities. Residential institutions that were "tuition dependent" struggled from losing revenues from dorms, especially those in isolated locations: "Like kids, traditional college age, college students go and live there. . . . That is their model of education." Some respondents at smaller liberal arts or state schools noted they did not receive support like the "COVID-relief" semester offered at better-funded universities. Interviewees observed that testing and mask mandates had been undercut by conservative legislatures, but also that their campus had been a leader in their community by showing care for students and effectively rolling out vaccination clinics and testing.

The pandemic presented unprecedented leadership challenges to university, college, and department administrators and also made it very difficult for faculty and staff to come together to address those challenges. While one interviewee noted that faculty had passed a formal vote of no confidence in a top administrator, others noted that their university administrators did their best to respond to the unpredictable and evolving situations.. Some respondents faulted administrators for operating without transparency, jumping too quickly to cut salaries, and failing to prioritize support and safety for students, staff, and faculty. One participant reported that her colleagues were working without a contract for a year after cuts in pay because of ongoing union disputes. Interviewees were more divided over university leaders' responsiveness to the underlying mental health pressures faced by students and faculty because those concerns were seen to require a deeper commitment and sustained funding, as discussed further below.

> *There were probably three times the number of jobs available as there are right now, and . . .as the semester progressed, I saw where departments were shutting down . . .* [I felt] *this overwhelming anxiety of I'm not even going to have a job . . .when this thing is over. . .To be completely honest my focus shifted. It wasn't so much a let me figure out where I want to go, or even where would be the best fit. I changed my thinking to like who's going to offer me a job, and I hate that I had to think about it like that because . . .I don't want to job hop. I want to find that space that . . .will be a good fit for me, and so it became much more tactical.*

Most interviewees praised departmental leaders who were caught in the middle between evolving university procedures and the individual crises faced by students and faculty, but others were more critical. One noted that she was forced to teach in the classroom even though she had requested to transition to online and had the expertise to do so. She felt she was unnecessarily put under extraordinary stress. Numerous interviewees noted how they and their colleagues stepped up to help such individuals. Such invisible service was often not recognized in workload assignments, but several TT interviewees noted that they were offered the opportunity to delay their tenure reviews. Unfortunately, as discussed in the attached research review, P&T clock delays have been found to have a more positive impact on male faculty productivity. Other interviewees recounted how faculty but not staff were provided with flexible expectations and increased support such as maternity leaves.

The six parents who discussed their family talked about the "chaos" they experienced as "a nightmare" that was "physically and emotionally draining." One parent explained how he had not done research for fifteen months, and others noted that they could not find the time or cognitive space to write.

Several interviewees noted that those teaching off the tenure track were more impacted by the transition to online. While some tenure-track faculty were able to get by with how they wanted to respond to teaching online, NT faculty had to pick up the slack under much stricter mandates. One interviewee noted that the most impacted were part-time instructors:

> We're throwing all this new technology, all this new medium of teaching off on our part-time faculty, which was kind of crappy, because the part-time faculty . . . get paid horribly. I mean, like less than $3,000 for a class. So you have a three-credit class and you're getting paid like $2,200 for it. So it's pretty awful, right? And so then on top of all of that, . . . the college didn't give us a webcam.

I think in teaching, we can never again assume that the students are like, absorbing information. I think, because in pandemic teaching, we had to be more thoughtful about if a student is not actually there on the other end. But in our classes, we should also be thoughtful about if students are actually there and engaging. And in pandemic teaching, you know, I was able to say, okay, here's a question. I'm putting it on the screen, put your answer in the chat as a private message to me, or put your answer in the group chat, . . . And I think some of that we can extend into our regular teaching . . . . Can there be more collaborative writing during class? I think that students really value those tools, and they're more comfortable with them now. So I think that engagement might go up as a result of the pandemic.

While many interviewees appreciated the convenience of working from home, one of the most common concerns was the isolation the pandemic created. This stress made departmental discussions of divisive issues even more challenging. Relationships became strained when interactions were limited to Zoom meetings in which some colleagues remained silent and unresponsive "Zoom ghosts." Concerns were often expressed that faculty might keep to themselves after the pandemic, resulting in decreased collaborations and more "siloed" departments. One interviewee observed,

> Everyone I know is incredibly burnt out, disenchanted, angry, tired. Not their best self, just in general. I think that like, are you going to see a lot of like decreased buy-in, decreased job satisfaction, . . . [and] strained relationships in departments.

3. What do you see as the lasting impact of the pandemic?

While many interviewees were concerned that the pandemic would undermine their department's collaborative culture in a lasting way, others speculated that the differing impact of the pandemic on younger and older faculty might persist. Many interviewees noted that older faculty struggled with the transition to online, and several noted that senior faculty had remained less involved. The research cited in our concluding overview also notes that older faculty have remained less engaged, perhaps out of continuing health concerns. One interviewee noted that younger faculty have lived through the formative impacts of the great

recession, mass demonstrations, the insurrection, and the pandemic. She concluded that younger faculty often identify more with students and were more likely to join them in social-justice demonstrations: "It mattered a lot to students that we showed up." Such identifications can be a source of resilience.

An interviewee raised a question that every department needs to be asking: "How do you start your career when . . . you're totally fried?" Many interviewees expressed concerns about whether the increased awareness of mental health and related services would be continued. One participant noted that her academic work culture still encouraged burnout: "That's the problem with academics, isn't it? We just take it all on and keep moving because we're so used to doing that." This same participant felt the "burnout of the faculty will be lasting." Another interviewee observed that she had come to realize that her family was more important than her career. Our departments and institutions will need to recognize that such perceptions are a healthy part of the life of many early-career faculty. Older faculty will need to recognize that the choices they made with prioritizing work may differ from those made by younger faculty cohorts.

Several interviewees noted that they expected that their colleagues' commitment to improving work-life balance would be long lasting. One interviewee who had left the academy in part because of the lack of boundaries around work demands noted that such demarcations are vital to retaining faculty and staff. Healthy work-life balance has also been shown to be vital to creativity and productivity. As one interviewee noted, we need a "larger recognition that, you know, everyone has different, different vulnerabilities, different responsibilities at home. And to just kind of make policy and . . . reformat the classroom around those kinds of realities."

The concern for wellness and self-care often came up in discussions of teaching. Several participants noted that their compassion towards students increased. Five participants expressed hopes that compassion for students' vulnerabilities would converge with the increased visibility of faculty labor to lead departments and institute policies that pay more attention to work-life balance.

This attention to wellness and self-care was integrally related to another result from the pandemic that interviewees hoped would be sustained: increased attention to accessibility. While interviewees noted the access challenges faced by some students, the move to online teaching was viewed as "an accessibility moment" in education. Many respondents saw the increased number of online courses and the use of collaborative platforms in classes as positive steps towards widening access to higher education, including online advising and tutoring in writing centers.

Accessibility, wellness, and work-life balance have generally been understood to be accommodations for those who need more help. This perspective was challenged by several of our lines of discussion, most notably our discussions of leadership. More wholistic and compassionate perspectives on leadership were articulated by many women and some men faculty, staff, and nonacademic interviewees. This concern for prioritizing rather than simply accommodating people's needs was informed by the interviewees' own experiences seeking jobs and building a place for themselves in departments that were overwhelmed with stress and anxiety.

4. How effectively is your department responding to the leadership challenges it is facing?

Many interviewees were faced with the problems that have been documented in research on national trends: There has been a 40% drop in BAs in English in the last ten years and declining TT hiring even before the pandemic. Several of our interviewees observed how the inability to replace leaders had sent their English department into decline, with heads pressed "against the wall" by a bottom-line mindset that devalued the contributions of the humanities. Much more positive dynamics were reported by other interviewees, depending in part on regional differences in college-aged populations, and also on how effectively their departments were adapting to these environmental changes.

Some interviewees described departments that were proactively adapting and others that lacked the individual and collective leadership to change. Major leadership gaps were reported by about 25% of our interviewees. Interviewees noted that their senior colleagues were reluctantly pressed into leadership roles because faculty losses had left their departments with few mid-career faculty willing to step up. One interviewee noted that their small department established a rotation system in which all had to serve as head even if they did not want to. Several respondents noted that when no TT faculty member wanted "to step up," NT faculty were given leadership roles on an interim basis. They sometimes had to struggle with supervisory duties and without the standing to implement major changes.

> *Going into the English department was sort of like walking into your divorced parents fighting, and so basically, there's just all of these underlying conflicts that you're not privy to . . . beneath the surface, like various real and perceived slights from the last 15 years . . . Another part of it is I'm the only rhetoric and writing type person, right? Like, the rest of them are all pretty traditional literature people, and so a lot of them are really invested in how do we get our students to appreciate great literature . . . The reason* [students] *don't want to take these classes is because you're insisting they read Alexander Pope, right? .... So part of it is disagreements about pedagogy, and sometimes . . . it is. . . one senior colleague who's super abrasive and . . . upsetting.*

Many respondents cited leadership challenges in English departments. Several shared striking examples of how their departments had lost heads and directors, including one who had reportedly been such an engaged leader that his department turned him down for tenure because all the time he invested in leading the program the department depended on did not leave him with enough time to fulfill traditional research expectations. Many interviewees noted that their department struggled with faculty heads who were not keeping up with the times. For example, one interviewee joked that his head was still "printing his emails," and another noted the ineffectiveness of a longstanding head who burned up meeting times with routine announcements and did not leave enough time to deliberate on vital problems. As a result, "nothing ever happens." The interviewee noted that he "dreads" going to departmental meetings because they are the "least efficient, most meandering" meetings he had ever attended. He observed that the resulting inertia sapped the departments' collective potentials.

"Toxic" interactions left some of the assistant professors we interviewed feeling they were not able to be heard in their departments: "It's . . . a numbers game" because "there's more literature people than comp people, so that's who ends up dominating." The "war" between literature, composition, and creative writing was seen by one interviewee as distracting from efforts to defend departments: "Stop fighting these little battles and instead look at the larger war of legitimizing" the department's mission. Interviewees who criticized English departments' resistance to change noted that such tendencies arose in part because older faculty believed that adapting to prevailing environmental changes was a matter of selling out their values.

> *We have a coordinator. And the coordinator is kind of a WPA, but kind of a catch all for everything else. So it's not, it's not a clear WPA position, but she's kind of responsible for a lot of the WPA composition type stuff. But then she does other things that are not WPA-related at all. And I just started asking if people needed mentors, you know, I'd be happy to help out because that's what I started. And so I've been working with some people, . . . and I've been mentoring now for like about three years.*

The divisions between literature and writing faculty were cited as a problem by one third of our faculty interviewees. Such problems differed in departments with significant numbers of writing faculty and thriving writing majors and also in some smaller departments where the tendency toward "territorialism" included not just divisions among literature, creative writing, and composition studies but also English education, linguistics, and other disciplines such as communications and drama. Seven of our interviewees did not work in English-only departments but in writing, liberal arts, communications, and education departments and programs. Some departments have worked through their internal divisions to develop a range of majors, as discussed further below. Most interviewees from other departments criticized the English departments in their institutions, while also acknowledging that their own units were facing some similar leadership challenges that were exacerbated by hiring restrictions that prevented them from replacing heads and directors.

The leadership challenges faced by new faculty varied not only by the type of department but also by the type of institution. Many interviewees who worked in community colleges and smaller colleges noted that their colleagues had been conscripted into leadership roles for a stipend of just a couple of thousand dollars. When they refused, assistant professors had to step up. Five of the thirty interviewees were serving as their department's principal writing program administrator (WPA), and several others had leadership roles in running writing centers, teaching practicum courses for new TAs, directing courses, and mentoring instructors. The lack of leadership support for such roles was noted by several interviewees. Several assistant professors recounted how they stepped up to fill leadership vacuums in their department in ways that tend to be overlooked by discussions of writing program leadership as writing program administration.

> "The Evolving English Major": "*Report documents decline in numbers of majors but growth in new tracks. Of the specializations within major, writing is doing relatively well, and literature not so much.*" Inside Higher Ed, 7/18/18; based on 2016-17 MLA report, "A Changing Major."

While many of our TT interviewees showed a willingness to step up to play leadership roles, the NT faculty we talked with tended to have fewer such opportunities and were more overloaded with teaching and service duties that were not fully represented in their assigned workloads. NT and other interviewees with heavy loads noted that the lack of leadership in their department contributed to their burnout in ways that were being exacerbated by the inability to replace retiring faculty:

> The biggest problems we'll have right now is that we have people who are older . . . They're starting to retire, and we're not getting any funding to hire new people to replace them. So it's sort of like a game of attrition . . . . I teach at the community college, we teach a five-five load, so I'm teaching five classes a semester. And, you know, for basically, the last five years . . . , I've taught nine classes a year of this, which is a lot of grading, so it's a lot of burnout.

5. Are your coworkers revising curricula to increase enrollments?

When asked about enrollments, some reported the steep declines that were shaping the evolution of majors in departments across the county. To adapt to these trends, participants reported their departments were creating interdisciplinary minors and majors, removing prerequisites to enable non-majors to take classes, revamping period-based curricula, and making classes more "broadly applicable." Recruitment efforts included organizing promotional events, overhauling social media pages and websites, and asking first-year-writing instructors to send students personalized invitations to major in English.

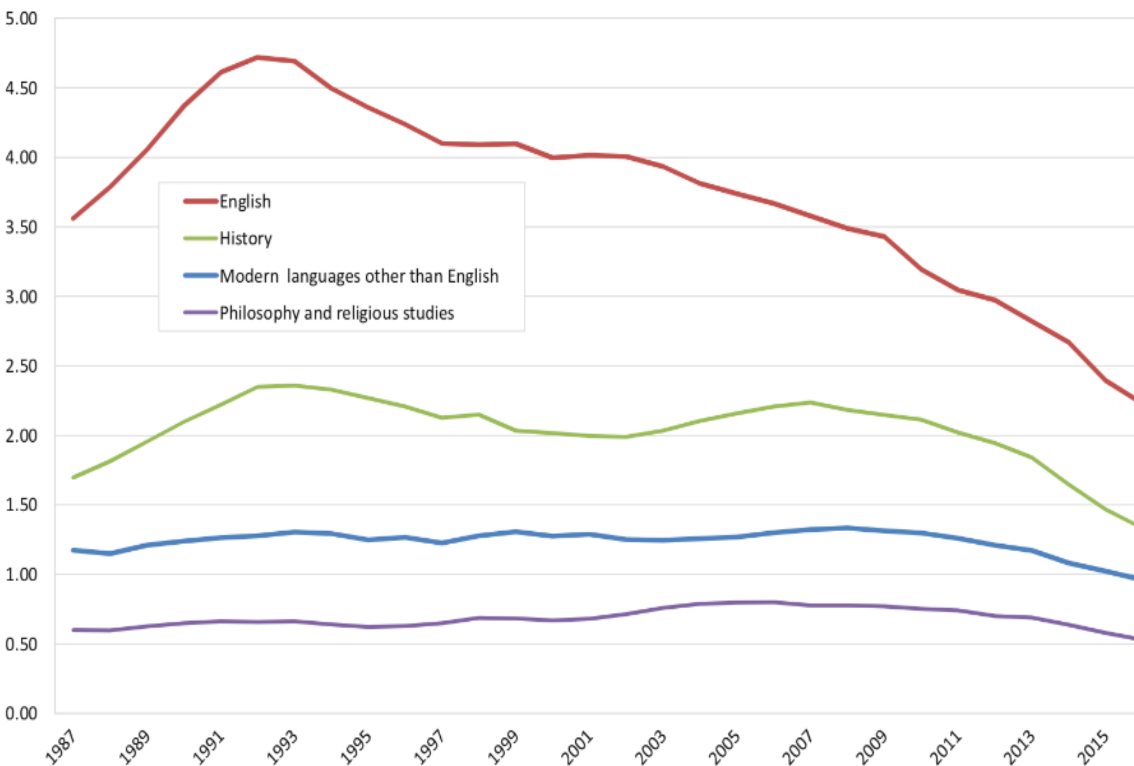
One interviewee noted that every department meeting had focused on how to recruit more students and a special working group had been created to work on increasing enrollments. However, this interviewee and others reported that major changes were slow in coming. The interviewee also noted that graduate enrollments were also being cut because the administration was reducing funding for TAs. Such external pressures were cited by several interviewees who discussed the struggles of their departments to implement significant reforms. One interviewee described how his department seemed to be locked into a survival mindset as a result of a loss of trust in university leadership and self-justifying complaints that students were just not interested in literature like they had been.

A professor with a split appointment noted that his communications department had an "understaffed popular" major while English had an "overstaffed unpopular" one. Another interviewee noted how his English department relied upon the required gen-ed courses in literature that have been cut in most universities. According to another interviewee, "The conversation in English is perpetually about" recruiting majors, but little progress was made because of an unresponsive head. Others reported broad changes: "We pretty much all universally agreed" that historical surveys and other required courses were "not working," so the major was "opened up" and made "customizable" with "topical" course titles.

One interviewee expressed a common concern that institutions are moving away from liberal-arts missions to focus on "undergraduate research, which is code for science." The interviewee observed that "the challenge for our department is to be competent and relevant and feel included in the initiatives on campus." At this interviewee's BA institution, those initiatives included public health, with related adaptations in "health and the humanities." The

interviewee noted that the faculty member with the necessary expertise had retired and not been replaced, “so that’s another challenge, but there’s a challenge everywhere.”

Other interviewees reported more positive trends. A couple of interviewees noted that enrollments returned to previous levels after the first year of the pandemic, especially in writing courses and writing majors. Several interviewees were involved in such undergraduate and



graduate programs, including technical and professional writing. Those interviewees tended to see leadership as an integral part of their teaching and were optimistic about the technological and social changes that were coming to the fore in the increased attention to professional writing, visual literacies, and organizational communications. “Digital rhetoric scholars” and other “nerds” were seen to be leaders of the “pervasive change” that had “fantastic” potential to transform conceptions of cognition, ethics, and culture. Several interviewees were attuned to such environmental changes and reported that their departments were being “very intentional’ in recruiting majors, providing internships, offering donor-supported career fairs, and, in one case, following the lead of postcolonial scholars who were helping to move a department’s undergraduate curricula beyond its traditional Anglo-American focus.

Some of these discussions touched on how the transition to online contributed to reforms of majors, but this topic came up less than one might expect, perhaps because of broader concerns about the underlying trends involved. While some praised the move to online, others identified it with an increased reliance on outsourced services, business-minded administrators,

and declining faculty control of curricula. One interviewee discussed how his college's software application for writing assessment and placement was undercutting his coworkers' efforts to develop shared approaches to writing assessment. He joked about how the placement software his community college was using had placed Hemingway and Jesus in basic writing courses after he ran passages from novels and the Sermon on the Mount through the program. While this interviewee identified his concerns with "online nebulous institutions" that sell college credits for low contact courses, another interviewee cited examples where first-year-composition credits had been disbursed across the curriculum out of frustrations with an unresponsive English department. These sorts of trends pose direct threats to English departments' reliance on the first-year-composition courses that account for 40-50% of all the courses offered by English departments in PhD, MA and BA institutions according to the 2014 MLA report on staffing, cited in section 7.

Of the 196 PhD, MA, and BA departments that responded to the MLA survey. 87.5% were revising, planning revisions, or had recently revised majors, while another 10% had ade revisions since 2000.

Departments were asked to report on whether enrollments were "sharply lower or lower," "unchanged" or "highly or sharply higher" (which were not defined). 66.3% reported lower or sharply lower overall enrollments.

***These types of majors saw declines**:*
- *74% of literature majors,*
- *69% of majors without tracks,*
- *50% of rhetoric & comp. majors,*
- *22% of prof. writing & writing studies,*
- *21% of creative writing.*

***The only majors reporting that saw large increases** in enrollments were*
- *40% of creative writing majors,*
- *33% of prof. writing and writing studies,*
- *27% technical writing*

6. Is your department making efforts to address social justice and anti-racist issues?

The environmental change that virtually all participants were excited to discuss was the rising attention to social justice. Interviewees discussed the social-justice courses they are teaching, the committees they are helping lead, and related reforms such as revised mission statements, diversity workshops, and equitable hiring practices. Several respondents talked about how they were working to resist state prohibitions against critical-race theory and basic writing, in part by engaging in coalitional work related to Black Lives Matter and immigrant rights.

One Latina assistant professor who had initially said she did not see herself as a leader outside her classroom and family later talked about a half dozen social-justice initiatives she was helping to lead. When asked about that incongruity, she acknowledged that "doing things that need to be done" should be considered leadership even though she did not have any supervisory authority over others. When we talked about our focus on coalitional leadership as an alternative to focusing on individuals in positions of authority, she looped back on her discussions to integrate them into a coalitional view of leadership that she identified as "feminist." When we invited her and others to consider the contradictions that emerge when

traditional conceptions of leadership are viewed from a social-justice perspective, she deftly pivoted to discuss leaders as "connectors."

> *Why isn't anybody saying anything? You know, there was a deafening silence on the part of leaders in response to* [BLM]. *So a group of faculty, just myself and about three other people who are in leadership roles . . . decided we need to do something, we need to say something, right? If nobody else is going to say something, we need to* [for] *our incoming graduate students.*

The faculty of color whom we interviewed and some other interviewees noted that the faculty in their department were almost entirely white ("one of the whitest on campus" according to one interviewee), and undergraduate English majors were also characterized as disproportionately white. Many respondents noted their departments and institutions were making diversity efforts that increased significantly after the murder of George Floyd. Several faculty of color noted that they had been enlisted to take up leadership of the increased initiatives, and a couple pointedly observed they had been hired to "fix" diversity problems that they did not create and which could only be remedied if Anglo faculty stepped up. It was also observed that there are very few BIPoC faculty to teach the diversity courses that students want and need.

Some of these faculty initiatives were university-wide efforts undertaken in collaboration with students. These collaborations are vital to enhancing the experience of students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. One interviewee noted that when she engaged in discussions of social justice, she felt more aligned with graduate students than with other faculty. She observed that talking about BLM and other social-justice issues with her senior colleagues could be "a tricky conversation, and for the most part, kind of a non-conversation." She discussed how she had helped to build a coalition with other faculty and staff, publicize a call for action, and develop instructional resources. This "collective" organized demonstrations and meetings to press universities to take action. This sort of coalition building was cited by a half-dozen of our TT interviewees, and when we identified leadership with enabling collective action, several said they loved that "remix" and looped back to identify it with aspects of their social and political engagements.Other respondents discussed how their departments were proactively working to integrate social-justice themes into their udergraduate courses. One

> *Faculty have very much been about how do we front load . . . social justice issues, how do we give greater . . . emphasis on Black literature, African American literature, and so that's been a big push... We theme the courses, . . . and, these should be big themes . . . We also just recently did a diversity and equity kind of review of our curriculum. It was our assessment goal for a year. . . The younger faculty were kind of like, we should make it more explicit, right? . . . It is the right thing to do and also might attract students, and some of the older faculty were basically like, I'm not sure that we need to do that . . . [With our] new hire, what we're trying to do right now is . . . to kind of jumpstart our conversations around this . . . We're particularly looking for someone who uses kind of Media Studies or new media as a way to understand social justice movements.*

interviewee noted that her department was one of the first on campus to make contributions to diversity, equity, and inclusion part of annual assessments of faculty, and that the department was "proud" to highlight its leadership in this area, in part to make the "case for the English major on campus more broadly."

Several interviewees expressed concerns about the rising interest in diversity and equity issues. The deepest expression of concern came from an NT faculty member who felt that his own career prospects had been overshadowed by his department's decision to commit all future TT hiring to diversifying the ethnic profile of the department. He observed that a hiring freeze had supposedly been implemented, and then his department had hired several minority faculty without national searches, and this left him thinking that he had to leave the academy to find advancement. This assessment provided another example of the vital importance of transparency and personal engagement in departmental leadership.

Other interviewees were concerned about tokenism and empty gestures. One TT faculty member of color expressed hopes that this focus on social justice is "not just a trend" and questioned how departments can create lasting change in both what and how they teach. Two other participants voiced similar concerns with the "trendiness" of social-justice initiatives. As one of those participants discussed, adding a class, making a public statement, or offering one-time diversity workshops are necessary but insufficient steps.

The more sustainable changes participants discussed were waiving GRE scores for graduate admissions, moving beyond standardized test scores for student placement in FYW, creating systems of support for faculty of color after they are hired, adopting textbooks that treat social-justice issues as central rather than marginal, and seeking grants and funding to integrate social justice into general education curricula.

The interviewee quoted at the top of this page recounted how her community-college department began conversations of Asao Inoue's work with labor-based contract grading when the pandemic hit. As you can see in the quote, social justice was a pivot point where she was able to lean in while still an assistant professor to help lead her colleagues through a curriculum review to consider antiracist reforms that she was envisioning leading, including the hire of a colleague who would help advance innovations that would engage students and transform established disciplinary paradigms.

Other interviewees discussed how their standpoints on such leadership initiatives differed from older faculty: "Our more senior colleagues feel maybe a little defensive that they don't know how to do that better, and the younger colleagues maybe feel a little more empowered to lead those discussions without as much fear." This interviewee noted that he and others in rhetoric and writing were better positioned to lead a social-justice initiative

Social Justice English Majors and Resources

- Literature and Social Justice, Lehigh U
- Imagining Social Justice, U of Pittsburgh
- Literature, Social Justice, & Environment, Texas Tech
- Social Justice: Race, Class, Gender, Ability, Amherst
- Social Justice and Literature, U of North Carolina

Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication, Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young, 2017

because they teach student-centered classes that have a formative impact on all students' first-year experience. Several interviewees cited courses they had created that directly addressed social justice and civic engagement, for example a course in "Writing for Change" that had developed into an undergraduate minor.

7. Is your department treating nontenure-track faculty fairly and including them in discussions on these issues?

We talked with a lecturer, an instructor, a visiting assistant professor, two staff who are part-time instructors, and at least four interviewees who had worked as nontenure-track faculty before leaving the academy or finding a TT position. We unfortunately did not explicitly ask other TT interviewees about their prior teaching experiences. Our interviewees noted how their colleagues spoke about "adjuncts" and other NT faculty. One community college instructor noted that TT faculty were called "the full-time faculty," and others were called "part-timers," though some were actually full-time instructors on annual contracts. Whatever their titles, the NT faculty we talked with do the work they do because they are excited about teaching and care about students.

> *The instructor rank, which is where I'm located, . . . is you know, the bottom of the rung, or very nearly anyway. And it's generally recognized that it's . . . a tough job, it's a full-time teaching load. It does not pay super great . . . This is sort of just generally part of the conversation around the instructor rank… in the English department because writing programs and the English department staff wise is made up largely of instructors. So the concerns of the instructor rank are, I think, the concerns of the department. It is to the department's credit, that those concerns tend to be very publicly transparent, publicly discussed.*

Some worked in their departments for years, even though they might not be recognized by TT coworkers, especially those hired in the last years when conversations in hallways have been replaced by headshots on Zoom screens. Many of our TT interviewees noted they did not have much contact with their NT coworkers. Some reported that NT coworkers had the right to attend and vote in faculty meetings and others expressed concerns about "adjuncts"—a common term that glosses over the integral and varied roles of NT faculty in ways that can show insensitivity to NT concern.

The NT faculty we talked with reported they could attend departmental meetings but generally didn't. One of the three was working to leverage his expertise with technical communications to leave the academy. He recounted how he had been told he would be able to work his way into a TT position and now felt he was being forced out for asking hard questions. Two others had left NT jobs because of little pay and respect.

Like other NT faculty with PhDs in writing studies, our interviewees faced converging hierarchies because they teach service courses at the bottom of faculty ladders in departments that often prioritize literature. One interviewee noted that NT faculty were treated as "hired hands." While low wages and support are clearly issues, some large departments were characterized as impersonal and even hostile, leaving NT faculty "constantly battling for rights." Another interviewee who left the academy noted that her writing program had

established secure positions for NT faculty but had not followed up to create opportunities for career advancement and salary increases.

Our NT interviewees had a rhetorically sophisticated understanding of the challenges they faced. One provided a nuanced assessment of the exploitative systems he worked in without blaming his TT coworkers for the benefits it provided them:

> I think that the instructor representatives on the writing programs committee have their voices heard and respected and attended to in that setting. I think that the TT leaders of writing programs are interested in the value of instructors and the intellectual expertise that the instructors bring. But a writing program's a sort of logistical organism or pedagogical kind of entity. [It doesn't make] . . . the bigger decisions for the instructor rank—things like course load and salaries . . . And so I think that as we move sort of up into a broader sort of setting and we start thinking about what kinds of power . . . instructors have at the departmental rank, I have less knowledge of that. I have never served on the English department committee as an instructor representative.

The 2014 MLA Report on Staffing provides pre-COVID statistics on NT staffing levels that have increased in recent years according to the 2020-21 AAUP Report on the Profession.

	Types of Institutions		
% of All Courses Taught	PhD	MA	BA
Full-time TT	39%	41%	58%
FT NT	21%	26%	18%
PT NT	17%	27%	24%
TA	24%	7%	1%
% of Instructors			
Full-time TT	34%	38%	52%
FT NT	14%	19%	15%
PT NT	16%	32%	32%
TA	36%	10%	.9%

While he perceived that instructors were able to develop collaborative leadership within their program, he observed they were looked down on as "dirt" by corporate-minded upper administrators who considered them merely "working capital."

Another interviewee provided a stark example of how NT faculty were reminded of their standing in a department by being forced to stand at the back of the line of instructors waiting to sign up for courses. Before COVID, the interviewee recounted how all instructors were given "a lottery number" and required to stand in a hall waiting to pick their courses:

> It was always really awkward and uncomfortable that like the nontenure faculty, they call them specialized faculty, that they were sort of at the back of the line. Right? So the grad students got to schedule first because they had classes and, you know, weren't contingent faculty. And I think that's a moment that stands out to me where like, and it wasn't because like, the grad students had issues or anything, but it was more that departmental bureaucratic structure that made those differences and status really palpable.

Faced with such "palpable" reminders of how they had to stand and wait for what they needed, several interviewees recounted how they had gotten involved in unionization efforts and strikes as TAs and NT faculty. Several noted that these efforts were the result of bad leadership that failed to attend to the needs of those who made vital contributions. She observed that the impersonal dynamics of her department demonstrated a lack of "investment" in supporting NT:

> Being a part timer is really lonely, you know. If you're an adjunct, you don't really have a lot of connection to the department. And having someone you can go to, to ask questions, or to,

> you know, sort of get centered into what the department's doing or what they're asking or what the department needs or whatever.

She recounted how the only collegiality shown to her came from graduate students who reached out with offers of support. This lack of support was quite different from what she had experienced as a TA who had attended orientations each semester and worked with a peer mentor, a supervisor, and a representative TA association.

Another NT interviewee contrasted his current lack of leadership options with the role he played as a TA when he shared in “the work of leaders” as an “Assistant Director” of a writing program. He was very pragmatic about his current situation. For all its limitations, he remained committed to teaching and to his NT colleagues:

> I don't know about the tenure track folks at all, and how they're going to adapt. But everybody else, I think, is gonna feel a stronger sense of mission as a result, and also be a lot more aware and compassionate of students than ever before. Not that they weren't, but just more so now. We understand how they suffer.

This experienced faculty leader identified with his NT coworkers’ strengthened sense of mission, but he was unsure how TT faculty were going to “adapt” to changes because he did not work with them closely enough. This gap between TT and NT faculty weakens the collaborative leadership in place in English departments and contributes to the rising numbers of writing programs and departments that are splitting off from them. The ability of English and related departments to adapt to ongoing environmental changes will depend in part on whether they can make full use of the leadership in place in their staff and NT and TT faculty ranks.

8. How effectively is your department articulating its broader contributions and priorities?

The most instructive examples of the challenges of strengthening departments’ collaborative leadership came from discussions of how heads serve as intermediaries between their departments and upper administrators. Several interviewees discussed how they felt their heads had weakened their departments by not articulating their needs to upper administrators and by not helping the department understand institutional priorities and constraints. Several cited examples of how a lack of transparency weakened collaborations. One interviewee spoke about “the disconnect between the people you . . . look to for leadership . . . and the people who actually make decisions . . . above them.” One recounted how she had had stumbled with leading a project because her supervisor was unclear about the institutional needs. These discussions highlighted how less transparent heads undercut the collaborative leadership capacities of their departments.

Those collective leadership capacities are vital to adapting to the profound environmental changes facing English and related departments. The rising generation of leaders is aware that the challenge of “selling” the broader mission of their departments often begins with their colleagues. Some interviewees identified with their coworkers while criticizing them for being

unwilling to consider "benchmarks for efficiency and utility" because they "got into teaching Englis . . . to not have to worry about this." This interviewee noted that his coworkers resisted "new economic models" because "they don't want to sacrifice the kind of enclave that they created for themselves." He also recognized that selling the contributions of English in terms of competitive rankings "can undermine the mission of the English department" by adopting a mindset of "just producing for the sake of metrics." The interviewee noted that departments have "to think of savvy ways to sell it or manage it."

Chairs have to be a sort of mediator of that downward push into action from all of their faculty. And I imagine it's quite difficult, because, you know, you have potentially a large section of faculty that's totally checked out, because they've reached the point in their career where they are comfortable with that. And then you have a younger faculty who are trying to get tenure and can't take on full responsibility for new initiatives, so you have . . . rely on a shifting sort of middle ground of folks that are secure, going to be secure, and are still sort of up for it, so to speak, up for taking action. That pool can be very small sometimes.

Many of our interviewees showed a pragmatic flexibility and awareness of broader changes that may help them adapt in ways older generations of English department faculty are resistant to do. While participants generally recognized the importance of being able to articulate their pragmatic contributions, many also noted why faculty are resistant and exhausted by the pressures to justify their existence to administrators, especially when they are seen to be careerists seeking advancement. The same participant quoted above explains why the skill of articulation is often looked down on by professors who "come from the humanistic approaches," for them "it feels social science-y, or business-y to make these claims." He recounted how he had learned to overcome such reservations in his own leadership experience:

> In writing centers, I mean, it is like a small business sometimes, you know, in like the way that you have to think about it, like, in the way that you have to do your budget and things like that. And I think academics are not used to doing that, and don't often have opportunities to practice that or learn about why it's important. And I think it's just, we feel like these things should be self-explanatory.

Many of our interviewees had experiences that had made them more attuned to the "deep irony" that faculty in English departments "specialize in communication" and yet they resist pressures to communicate their value to the organizations they serve. He observed that English departments do not get to exist

> by fiat, right? … We do not have a God-given right to exist, we exist because we're providing value to our students and to the world at large. . . . We have no reason to be defensive about articulating that value. And we should recognize that other people are not going to assume that same value that we see. And if we can't show it to them, even though we're… English PhDs, then we are not doing our jobs as far as I am concerned. I think I am . . . in the minority for thinking about these things this way. And that is sometimes a point of frustration for me.

Interviewees recognized that their colleagues might not see themselves as specialists in communication, but some remained committed to working with them to promote the humanities without selling out their values. One interviewee discussed how these same competing forces were playing out in the high school literature courses that college English departments have depended upon to sustain public interest in literary studies. She was sharply critical of the English department for failing to focus on preparing English teachers, but she recognized that the department was reacting to the same forces she confronted in her efforts to resist the move away from literary studies in high school curricula:

> I feel like it's a case of not being valued and honored right in the grander scheme of things . . . People [believe] Oh, English, that's not important. And I get it because I taught English forever, and . . . my resistance to Common Core kind of lies in the fact that [where else are students] . . . asked to learn how to be human other than your English class, right? But we've stripped away the parts that make English amazing to basically be in service to other areas. They're like, Oh, they need to learn how to write for that, or they need to learn how to read for that.

I think English departments as a whole . . . are going to be fine. Right? But what it's going to come down to is what English departments are going to . . . to define themselves as . . . . If they kind of remain committed to this idea [that]. . . we are the repositories of great literature. . . That's not going to work . . . . There are successful English departments, but they're dramatically changing . . . their focus and their mission.

One interviewee noted that her "dream English department" would be less "self-serving" and more centered on "community relationships" to be of "service to the community." Another interviewee explained that departments should be doing what her Rhetoric and Writing Program was doing: "Reaching out to individual professors and other departments that you know can get behind [the work of your department] …building strong connections with other professors who are well positioned in their departments and getting them to see the synergies between what it is that our Rhetoric and Writing Program does and what they're asking their students to learn and become competent with." A different participant provided a success story of this type of interdisciplinary partnership to focus on integrative learning. He discussed how his prior English department promoted its major as a pre-professional counterpart to pre-law and pre-medical programs to do "the teaching that allowed students to innovate within their own fields."

These and other interviewees positioned themselves differently because they were in departments with differing sets of engagements. Those differences become obscured when we look at English studies and related fields from the perspective of doctoral English departments, especially those in better insulated universities. Most PhDs in English are trained in such departments, and their model of an English department is imprinted on successive generations even though most graduates will not work in a department that looks like that model. This imprinting limits the adaptive capacities of English studies by encouraging faculty to identify with a transcendental field of study that may be indifferent to the regional and institutional possibilities of their own departments. Almost half of our TT interviewees (9 of 21) worked in or were working to create departments that were not English-only departments, including

departments in writing and rhetoric, English and dramatic arts, humanities, and communications. Those of us involved in preparing future faculty need to reflect upon how well our graduate programs prepare faculty to work in such departments—and the other leadership positions our graduates increasingly move into when they graduate.

9. How well did your graduate program prepare you for the challenges you're facing?

At various points in our discussions, interviewees talked about how they had learned about leadership. When we asked about graduate programs, several responded with some version of "nothing can truly prepare you for this work." Many cited the collaborative aspects of their graduate student experience rather than graduate courses, including collaborating on research, working in writing centers, serving on committees, and doing qualitative research that involved community partnerships. Many cited collaborations with mentors, and several discussed how difficult interpersonal interactions had introduced them to how to negotiate conflicts and overcome hurdles. Those who had to jump right into administrative roles felt they were largely unprepared for "how to delegate, how to facilitate" and how to manage the workflow to protect their research time.

> *The mentorship I received from my advisor was very, very good. But I was trained primarily to be a good teacher. And to be very serious about research, which I think most R1s are. So that's what I was trying to do. And there were other opportunities for me to . . . get more into service or to understand some other things, but I had one of my dissertation committee members say it's not a good idea to see how the sausage is made too early. . . . She didn't actually want* [me] *to see just how contentious these things could be.*

Most graduate programs in English departments concentrate on preparing students to do research, but two of our interviewees graduated from less research-oriented graduate programs. Of course, most graduate programs in composition and English education emphasize teaching and provide preparation in curriculum development, professional writing, and program administration. Graduates of such programs are more likely to consider the sort of administrative work that is commonly identified with leadership, and according to several of our interviewees, these emphases helped them step into staff and nonacademic jobs, though they felt that step was more difficult than it might have been.

Two of our three staff worked in writing centers, and several other interviewees cited their collaborative work in writing centers as peer tutors as a formative experience in helping them understand leadership:

> we just viewed [the WC coordinator] as like our boss that we would go to for the most serious kinds of issues. But then there were sort of other leaders that emerged in the center, mostly just tutors who had been there for a few years who would take you under their wing and lead by example. So I often felt like all those levels of leadership, I felt supported, and I also felt like there were opportunities for me to take on leadership roles . . . . We created this nice environment where you would step into a leadership role and kind of step back at certain times to learn from each other. And I think that's kind of how I tried to function as a teacher too. And

now as like a teacher, trainer, . . . like at certain points, stepping back and letting other people take ownership of that leadership role.

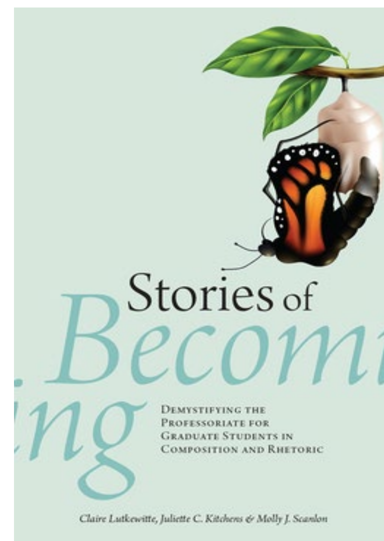
The give-and-take of such apprenticeships in collaborative leadership are an example of how many interviewees looked to the writing process and writing workshops as models of collaborative leadership.

In our discussions of how graduate school prepared next-gen faculty for leadership, the parallels between these collaborative processes were extended to include mentoring, organizing with other TAs, and serving on committees with faculty. Committee work was cited by several interviewees as the sort of apprenticeships where one learns how "the sausage gets made." Fractious faculty interactions were observed that hurt collaborations with students in ways one interviewee swore he would never let happen with his own students. Sometimes those conflicts helped the interviewees understand how collaborations can get tripped up by personalities, and several cited attending faculty meetings as TA reps as places they learned how "institutional networks" and "structures" shape what can be done and how to do it.
Qualitative research methods and community-based partnerships were also cited as formative models for how interviewees learned the dynamics of collaborative inquiry and problem-solving in graduate school. Several cited the importance of learning to listen with people, and one noted how her sense of what it means to be a leader with people was transformed by a "community remembrance project" led by a woman activist

> who really tried and strove for a different style of leadership than I think what we typically see where we have, you know, bullet points, we have agendas, we have things like that. She really focused more on the listening side, using our lived experiences. And like taking the actual time to address conflicts when they arose. We were in an interracial space talking about really heated issues, and so that meant, like, we don't need to just like keep plowing ahead on our agenda items. We need to take a step back and check in on our feelings and things like that.

This was one of the formative lessons in leadership that had enabled this professional staff member and NT instructor to conclude that internal conflicts were distracting English department faculty from coming together to articulate their shared contributions.
In addition to looking to their work with collaborative inquiries, this interviewee also discussed how her studies of rhetoric shaped her perspective. She observed leadership is

> a form of rhetoric. So you've got to understand who it is that you're leading. What are their needs? What kind of role can you play? For them that is . . . responsive to their needs, and effective for meeting those needs. So I think that like to be a good leader, you have to be responsive, you have to be able to sometimes shift your expectations . . . For me, leadership is about building community around whatever it is that you're doing. It's less about being like the sole person who has an answer, or who is sort of creating directions for something. It is, it's about



Stories of Becoming *draws on a pre-covid survey of new faculty to propose the reforms of grad programs discussed in the attached review of research.*

> working together and sort of being a catalyst for whatever it is that you need to do.

Another interviewee responded to our final question on whether he saw himself as a leader by distinguishing his current role as a nontenure-track instructor from his TA role as an Assistant Director in the Writing Program:

> If you'd asked me that question, a year and a half ago, or two years ago, when I was a graduate student, I probably would have said yes, because I was closely involved in a number of activities, or a number of the sort of systems that make up the enacting of power within the organization. I was the assistant writing program director, I was on a small committee, I was a research assistant for a prominent . . . leader in the department . . . I was probably one of the most recognizable names . . . to administrators and leaders and to my fellow graduate students.

This passage starkly contrasts the leadership possibilities of two communities of practice. The interviewee did not see a place in his role as an NT instructor for the collaborative leadership skills he had developed as a TA. We might attribute that lost potential to the constraints of his NT role, but we should also consider how his graduate experiences might have better prepared him to claim his rights to be a full contributor to the leadership in place in his writing program. Our graduate programs concentrate on research, the smallest part of the workloads of most of our graduates, and our focus on teaching tends to be confined to talking about the classroom. The collaborative leadership of writing programs ends up being defined as writing program administration. Next-gen faculty will step into institutions that do not conform to these categories, and our graduate programs need to face that fact to prepare the next generation of faculty leaders.

10. Given these challenges, how do you see your own leadership? For example, is leadership part of what you teach?

In this section we combine our discussions of recent graduates' views of leadership and the teaching of leadership because most interviewees cited their teaching as a principal area where they served as leaders. One might assume that faculty would think of themselves as leaders in the classroom because that is where they have designated authority over others. However, the two lines of discussion were connected by the interviewees' focus on their roles as facilitators in the classroom and in other collaborations. Many characterized their teaching role in terms such as a "guide on the side" as opposed to the more authoritative role of "the sage on the stage." Seven early-career faculty explicitly cited critical pedagogy as part of their guiding philosophy for teaching and collaborative inquiry. Others cited feminism, hip-hop, and the qualitative research methods mentioned in the prior section.

> *What I hope to do is prepare students to be leaders in their own right and in their own spaces, in their own fields, by teaching critical thinking and critical consciousness, . . . the foundational critical pedagogy elements, for the purpose of teaching how to read power structures, read spaces, read their situations because, like I said, that's kind of the foundation of my definition of leadership.*

Several interviewees focused on their teaching of rhetoric as explicitly concerned with teaching leadership because of its concern with civic engagement. Participants discussed how their students learned to "read" power structures to build coalitions and enact change. Many of these responses focused on equipping students with the rhetorical agency and the skills needed to solve problems and serve as advocates in their professional and civic lives. A handful of participants framed their answers by describing project-based leadership assignments. Two participants were implementing majors in advocacy and civic engagement, and others had taught writing classes on advocacy, community engagement, and leadership. Interviewees shared examples of students' research and advocacy, including the example in the quote below.

> *So, I had a F.L.I student—first generation, low income, right. There's a really robust community in the university I was teaching at, but she had some real concerns about access to resources. So she was from a grossly underserved population, Latina, parents were agricultural workers actually. So real rock star, but she recognized that there were gaps in the resources available to students like her who needed a lot of explicit guidance through the structures of the university, which are super opaque at times, right . . .* [She] *put together a proposal and brought it to the F.L.I office . . . She went out and did interviews in the community, she talked to her writing center. She did really fantastic work, and she was able to help folks see a problem that they didn't know was there. So she actually worked with staff and faculty and got their buy in, and it was really incredibly impressive.*

These leadership contributions were informed by visions of leadership that were shaped by interviewees' own struggles to find a position and build a place for themselves amidst the worst economic disruptions in almost a century.

The most powerful example of the leadership challenges that recent graduates confronted was a new PhD hired to start an ethnic studies department as a part of a cluster-hire initiative that was reduced to just two faculty, both assistant professors who were the only TT faculty from their ethnic group at the small college. Establishing an ethnic studies program is one of the most politically challenging initiatives one can imagine, and this assistant professor had to negotiate sometimes hostile and often difficult questions from all sides. Her vision of these leadership challenges was guided by an embodied commitment to caring for the students she served and a compassionate understanding of her white colleagues, including the well-meaning administrators who assumed they knew more than she did even though they had no scholarly or personal background in her ethnic community's experience. Her humility was but one part of her vision of leadership as compassion in action:

> I define leadership as the . . . ability and the willingness to use whatever skills and power that you have in whatever capacity you're in to help people grow and achieve their own goals . . . I would never say I'm a leader . . . The word [does not show] humility . . . For other people to see the characteristics and the attributes of a good leader, or of humility, in me and then be able to say you know … she's a good leader, of course, . . . I want to always bring those characteristics to the table. I just have problems, I have difficulty, with just labeling myself in

> that way . . . Thinking about other people, and how the things that you do and say impact these other people positively or negatively, is a clear sign of what type of leader you are and will be, even if they don't call themselves leaders.

The contributors to this study were all leaders in their own right. Our conversations provided them with an opportunity to discuss and reflect on their leadership achievements in ways they clearly valued, perhaps because some of their departments did not give them such opportunities to think of themselves as leaders. The perspectives of next-gen faculty are a vital resource for departments working to move past the retirements of the largest generation of faculty in history to implement innovations that are vital to helping English and related departments adapt to profound environmental changes. Next-gen faculty have the technological expertise that senior faculty often lack, and early-career faculty are more diverse, more engaged, and more enthusiastic about the social-justice initiatives that can help renew undergraduate majors. Their leadership provides models for graduate programs to consider and for senior faculty to support.

Such support requires that senior faculty listen and sometimes defer to the assessments of early-career faculty. T final example of a distributed model of leadership highlights the sort of reciprocity that is at the heart of the distributed models of leadership that are vital to building collaborative learning capacity. When we asked one respondent if he would like to revise the tendency to assume academic *leaders* refers to *administrators*, he responded,

> I would definitely remix and say, well, maybe it's not about me having to do or say something so that you feel like you could participate, maybe it's just how I perform in my own space right, and how you can build off of, build with, build through that performance.

From his research on hip-hop pedagogy as a model for administration, this interviewee revised prevailing assumptions about who is a leader in academe, and he also subtly shifted the conception of coalitional leadership that we were suggesting as an alternative. Rather than endorsing the assumption that collaborative leaders empower others, he set out an alternative vision of how people can perform in their own spaces in ways that synch up to build "off of" each other—listening to each other but not necessarily playing the same tune or looking to others to serve in their chorus.

A final example of how this can play out is provided by another interviewee who had consciously resisted the assumption that the way to advance in rhetoric and writing is to step up to the sort of administrative position held by many of the early-career faculty with whom we talked. When she was first hired, she protected her own space to do the work that mattered most to her, which included building on her ongoing collaborations with migrant communities. Once she was far enough along with that research to feel confident that she could sustain it through the promotion and tenure process, she stepped up to help lead a departmental initiative. Her department enlisted her to facilitate an effort to rearticulate its vision and guiding assumptions in all its "outward facing documents," including websites and program outcomes. She discussed how her department had done an environmental scan of the values, outcomes, and mission of all its undergraduate and graduate programs as well as its interdisciplinary leadership of the university's writing center and writing across the curriculum program. As

part of this strategic effort to orchestrate its expansive articulation apparatus, she was enlisted to get all five undergraduate and graduate directors

> working together and thinking more concretely about collective action: How can we facilitate and work together to achieve departmental goals and have more common outcomes across the board… Our graduate students tutor in the writing center, or they teach in our comp program . . . . We are all interconnected, and right now, we have leadership that is wanting to work together for collective action. And so it has been a really opportune moment. But it's a lot. It's been a lot of work… I think we are committed to this . . . as a whole . . . . We have to ensure we are all on board in our practices, in the classroom, in our meetings, in our scholarship, with some of these social-justice values.

This coalitional initiative is a powerful example of how next-gen faculty are undertaking the interdisciplinary work of strategically exploring their environment to consider opportunities to rearticulate the mission and values of their departments in ways that address pressing social-justice issues.

Such adaptive leadership is vital if our departments are to make the best of the environmental changes that are transforming higher education. To support early-career faculty in making such contributions, departments will need to do their best to give them their "own space" to balance their work and family commitments and allow them to decide when to step into formal leadership roles. To be successful, such efforts to build collaborative capacity must include the NT faculty who are a major part of the leadership in place in our departments. Such compassionate leadership will be very difficult to develop in departments that have gaps in leadership as a result of the rising retirements of senior faculty, but that generational transition represents an historic opportunity for the next-gen leaders who will shape the future of our departments in collaboration with the mid-career faculty who are now stepping up to serve as heads and directors.

Related Research on the Path Ahead for Recent PhDs

"The 'Long Covid' of American Higher Education" (7/1/21) will not end with the pandemic. Even before it began, converging trends were building to crisis proportions: student debt had doubled in the prior decade while the return on investment of a college degree stagnated; the ranks of TT faculty had shrunk so much they were teaching only 25% of all classes; a "demographic cliff" was coming with drops in college-aged populations; and online for-profit companies and black-box instructional units were selling low-contact credits to those seeking convenient college degrees. The pandemic brought the deepest job losses in history according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*'s "Forced Out" (3/19/21), which includes profiles of some of the staff and faculty laid off in the pandemic. These layoffs contributed to the "Great Disillusionment" (8/25/21), of faculty and staff leaving higher education, "just when they'll be needed most."

> Just as the COVID-19 pandemic helped to expose the inequities that already existed between students at every level of education based on race and socioeconomic class status, it has exposed existing inequities among faculty based on gender and the intersection of gender and

race. (Onwhuachi-Willig, "The Intersectional Race and Gender Effects of the Pandemic in Legal Academia," Hastings Law Journal, 72.6, 2021)

In higher education as in the rest of our society, the pandemic has disproportionately impacted vulnerable groups, including women, minorities, and those with less secure jobs. Many early-career faculty and staff are in these groups. NT faculty have been laid off, including disproportionate numbers of women faculty and faculty of color. Minority faculty are also more likely to carry the stress of severely impacted families and communities (AMA 10/7/20).

The pandemic has impacted women faculty in distinctive ways that may turn back decades of progress with bringing more women into senior faculty positions. Tenure-eligible women (TE) faculty were 20% more likely than their male peers to express concerns about being able to meet research expectations for promotion and tenure according to the *Chronicle*'s *"'On the Verge of Burnout': Covid-19's impact on faculty well-being and career plans"* (2020). The survey of 1100 faculty found that over 40% of the tenure-track (TT) respondents were considering new careers, and a phenomenal 38% of all respondents were planning on retiring early. The increasing numbers of senior faculty who are retiring are creating historic opportunities as well as challenges for next-gen faculty.

To address those challenges, universities implemented tenure-delay policies and other accommodations. Unfortunately, the related policies for parental delays of tenure reviews have been shown to benefit male faculty more than female faculty according Antecol et al., "Equal but Inequitable" (2018), as discussed in this *NYT* article.

To support early-career faculty, universities need to develop systematic reforms in collaboration with faculty leaders. Faculty leadership has been significantly weakened according to the AAUP's "Survey Data on the Impact of the Pandemic on Shared Governance" (2021). The published scholarship provides detailed proposals for related policies and institutional changes, as discussed in Mallsch et al., "In the wake of COVID-19" (2020). Guidelines for such efforts are included in this overview of needed reforms and this overview of the systemic changes that are needed to support women with children.

Department heads and senior faculty have an obligation to review research on these issues and practical strategies for addressing them. In addition to the resources cited above, policies and strategies for addressing the impact of the pandemic on women and faculty of color have

***Reset norms and expectations*:**
Articulate the value of teaching and service in an academic world where research is often seen as paramount. This work has always been essential to the functioning of the university and is especially critical now. The pandemic (and racial injustice) has resulted in an increased need for faculty to engage in outward facing public engagement, support and mentor students, and engage in committee and leadership efforts on campus and nationally. Therefore, communicate to faculty that this work is valued; align evaluation standards and criteria to match where faculty have placed their efforts to address the critical needs of this moment; adjust reward structures to mirror this commitment.

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been gathered on this crowdsourced google page and this crowdsourced set of links on the pandemic, race, gender, and academia from this MLA 2022 session. These resources include links to best practices on workload assignments (including online teaching).

Lessons Learned from our Discussions with Early-Career Faculty

1. Recognizing distributed forms of leadership can help early-career faculty articulate the impact of their research, teaching, and service.

Many early-career faculty are being pressed into serving in administrative roles. Service is generally undervalued in P&T reviews in ways that impact women and minority faculty, whose "invisible labor" has increased in the pandemic. Such contributions need to be recognized as forms of collaborative leadership that create more equitable and productive departments: "Calling out Whiteness: Faculty of Color Redefining Leadership" (2021), "Applying adaptive leadership to successful change initiatives in academia" (2006), and "Conceiving land grant community engagement as adaptive leadership" (2010). Rewarding adaptive leadership can help strengthen departments' collaborative capacities, as discussed in "Reimagining Leadership after the Public Turn" (2017).

> *Almost half of the tenured respondents to the Chronicle's survey reported they plan to retire within two years, while only 20% were planning to retire within two years in 2019. As the report notes, the rising retirements of senior faculty provide an "extraordinary opportunity to diversify our faculty."*

2. Recognizing adaptive leadership can help renew the collaborative leadership of departments that have been weakened by the pandemic.

Departments need to recognize the leadership they depend upon, including the leadership of next-gen faculty. One way to do that is by documenting pandemic impacts. Such efforts should not be seen as accommodations to established norms but as opportunities to revise those norms to support evolving communities of practice, as discussed in "United We Adapt: Communities of Practice Face the Corona Virus in Higher Education," (2020).

3. The wellness of early-career faculty and staff is a collective concern and not just an individual accommodation.

Peer mentoring is especially vital for women, minority, and others who underrepresented in their 'home' departments. Faculty of color are less likely to feel that they "fit" in their departments according to The Illusion of Inclusion (1/6/21). Such perceptions need to be addressed to cultivate "an atmosphere of self-care" (7/17/19). While wellness is often defined in individualist terms, the resilience of the communities most impacted by the pandemic provides powerful lessons in "social resilience" as a collective quality. Such resilience is discussed in "'Always Up Against': A Study of Veteran WPAs and Social Resilience" (2018) and *Feminist Rhetorical Resilience* (2012). To build such resilience, departments must be vigilant about how senior faculty can "gaslight" early-career faculty in ways recounted by our

interviewees. Such bullying can make next-gen faculty feel vulnerable and less willing to challenge assumptions and propose needed changes.

4. The leaders in place in departments need to be recognized and supported as part of such collaborative efforts.

When we discuss department leaders, we generally focus on the challenges faced by heads and rarely consider the ranks of NT faculty. Models of distributed leadership such as those set out in "Improving Leadership in Higher Education Institutions" (2009) are vital in considering how to resist "the new managerialism. Such leadership is also vital to developing "communities of practice" around initiatives such as curriculum reviews, environmental scans, and campus coalitions. The "Leadership in Place" perspective discussed by Jon Wergin (2004) is important to consider to reduce the tacit tendency to identify leaders as administrators..

5. Revisions and launches of new major provides opportunities for such efforts to build collaborative leadership.

A Changing Major: The Report of the 2016-17 ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the English Major provides a detailed overview of English majors and efforts to revise them. What We Are Becoming: Developments in Undergraduate Writing Majors (2010) provides case studies of developing writing majors in various types of institutions. Efforts to revise majors are discussed in the 2019 issue of ADE Bulletin. The traditionalist assumptions that limit such efforts are evident in the editorial by former MLA leader David Laurence, "On Humanistic Expertise" and in his prior pieces as ADE editor encouraging heads to dismiss declines in majors as due to "vocationalism" (ADE 2003) and "massification" (ADE 2015). The leadership of the MLA on these issues is contrasted with that of NCTE in The Evolution of College English (2010).

6. Social-justice and anti-racist initiatives are a vital area where early-career faculty are connecting with next-gen students in ways that can enhance efforts to renew undergraduate programs.

The coalitional leadership involved is discussed in a special issue of *Composition Studies* entitled "Diversity is Not Justice" (2021), which includes an article by Arellano, Cortez, and Garcia, "Shadow Work: Witnessing Latinx Crossings in Rhetoric and Composition," on the complexities of undertaking social justice leadership in the "gated faculty community." Open-access resources include *Dismantling Racism: A Resource Book* (2016) and Condon and Ashanti Young's Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication (2017). Social-justice equity is one of the best examples of the values and need for distributed models of leadership, as discussed in "Shared Equity Leadership: Making Equity Everyone's Work" (2021). The systemic inequities to be overcome are examined in "Women, Work, and the Academy: Strategies for Responding to 'Post-Civil Rights Era' Gender Discrimination" (2007).

7. Such efforts must recognize and support nontenure-track faculty as vital contributors to the leadership in place in departments.

Discussions of departmental leadership rarely include NT faculty, unless the topic is labor organizing, as for example in this AAUP article "Faculty Forum: Ways to Organize Non-Tenure-Track Faculty" (2011). Some of the most actionable research on improving support for NT faculty has been done by Adrianna Kezar, most notably the Delphi Project, which developed an extensive toolbox that includes a climate survey instrument to assess support for NT faculty. Kezar also developed a social-justice model of NT faculty organizing that draws on design thinking, "Using Design for Equity in Higher Education for Liberatory Change: A Guide for Practice" (2021), though the model adopts the top-down perspective that is common in most discussions of academic leadership.

8. English departments need to consider their interdisciplinary and community engagements to articulate their contributions and strengthen institutional support.

Many English departments are using "engagement" as a frame for rearticulating their public mission. A primary source for such efforts is Ernest Boyer's "The Scholarship of Engagement" (1996), which is pivotal to efforts to adapt traditional conceptions of research to the evolving relations of higher education and democracy, as discussed in "Boyer's 'Scholarship of Engagement, a Retrospective'"(2016). Scholarship of Engagement resources have been developed for use in P&T reviews to frame community engagements and applied research and for a wide range of scholarly initiatives concerned with social justice, service learning, community partnerships, and reforms of higher education. Boyer's paradigm has been a major source for the historical transition from the traditional research university to the international movements associated with the engaged university.

9. Graduate programs should consider how they are preparing students to address the leadership challenges and opportunities they will be facing.

Recommendations on how graduate programs can better prepare future leaders are provided by *Stories of Becoming: Demystifying the Professoriate for Graduate Students in Composition and Rhetoric* (2022). Lutkewitte and her coauthors' recommendations are also helpful for early-career faculty: learn to tell the stories that matter to you and the field; watch the job market to think strategically about your **t**eaching, **r**esearch, **s**ervice, and **a**dministration; use your leadership to build synergies among them; manage your time; and collaborate to reduce isolation and increase your productivity. To effectively support the next generation of leaders, grad programs will need to reassess how insulated they tend to be because prior surveys of early-career faculty have found that they feel unprepared because they do not know very much about how universities work (Kelsch & Hawthorne, "Preparing New Faculty for Leadership," 2014).

10. Faculty leadership development is vital to resisting the managerial mindset that is reshaping higher education.

The importance of "Cultivating the Next Generation of Academic Leaders" (2014) is examined in an interview study that reports the trends witnessed by our interviewees: baby boomers "preparing to retire," "mid-career faculty . . . reluctant" to serve in increasingly complex administrative roles because of concerns about "work-life balance," their own research and

teaching, and “going to the dark side.” Two collections of essays provide varied perspectives on mentoring faculty women of color: *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (2012) and *Presumed Incompetent II: Race, Class, Power, and Resistance of Women in Academia* (2020). The second collection includes narratives and assessments of promotion and tenure, coalition building and allyship, white fragility and microaggressions, and survival and change strategies.

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