

Chapter 14. I've Got a Secret: I'm Contingent. (Wait, You're Contingent Too?)

Anonymous

I've worked in writing centers for over 30 years, first as a graduate student tutor and then as the person responsible for a center's operations. I realize that description is a convoluted way of describing "director," but up until very recently, I wasn't allowed to use the title of director. To be a director, I would need to report to a second-level supervisor rather than a third-level supervisor. I'm not going to even hint at my institution type or give those supervisor levels titles, since I don't wish to be identified. Why don't I want to be identified? Above all, my position has always been contingent, and I am employed at the pleasure of the president of my institution—with precious few protections afforded me by my "right to work" state. I'm not going to talk about scandalous things here, but I've witnessed contingent employees being punished for insubordination because they talked about their institutions in a negative light. I'm not necessarily worried about being punished as much as I am about damaging relationships at my institution that are new, as well as those that are decades old.

Back to the point: all my job titles have been far beneath the level of director, as has my pay. I've been both part-time and full-time. Even though I teach classes regularly, publish research, mentor tutors, and generally consider the writing center a learning space—a classroom, as it were—I have never held a tenure-track faculty position. Ironically, now that I report directly to a second-level supervisor, I have no disciplinary home other than the writing center. I was removed from the department/discipline in which I've taught for decades. I no longer attend department meetings or have any voice in curricular development in the discipline that houses the class that all tutors in my center take to become peer tutors.

When talk of making me a director started, the intention was that I would be a so-called faculty director who would teach as well as run the center—as I always had—and I would stay within my home department. Promises of instant tenure were made, but not at a full professor rank, even though the institution had just hired a person with less experience as a full professor. Promises of a substantial pay raise were also made, but complications of summer contracts (or lack thereof) and a teaching load untenable for running a writing center were thrown into the mix. As the mysterious negotiations dragged on for months, my supervisor told me that while there was support for the shift to faculty, it became clear that it would be better for me, my workload, and for the center to take the staff director option. And then, within a short month, it happened. My

job was reclassified, and I was moved out of my home department and became director classified as staff. Just like that.

Why do I stick it out? Quite simply, this is my career, and writing center jobs are not easy to come by—particularly in my region of the country, with my educational level, and at my institution type. My work is in writing centers. My work is in educating peer tutors, studying the impact of that education, and implementing programs to enhance student literacy. Likewise, I've pursued leadership opportunities in the field's professional organizations, presented at conferences, and published with regularity. I receive no formal recognition from my institution for this commitment to the field. It is not a part of my workload or my requirements to advance. The only opportunities for advancement that I've had, in fact, are from instances like the one I described above, where I or my colleagues push for change in my position. Advancing isn't typically in the scheme of things for writing center administrators, after all.

My professional work outside my institution has helped me understand that most of us in writing centers are in contingent positions and writing centers themselves are often contingent spaces that are subject to elimination or restructuring within the institution on a whim.

According to the Writing Centers Research Project, which has run sporadically since 2001, about 60 percent of those who work as administrators in writing centers hold contingent positions (Ervin, 2002; Denny, 2015). We've also all heard the stories of tenured writing center directors who've had their writing centers ripped out from under them or have had them moved into an institutional configuration that doesn't best fit the needs of their students, their staff, or frankly, themselves. I know of three tenured faculty writing center director colleagues who have undergone these demoralizing experiences. Two chose to retire because of them. One stuck it out but was under continual duress from a new supervisor who knew nothing of writing center work but thought it their place to force their uninformed ideas about writing center work on them.

Those are tenured faculty colleagues in contingent writing center spaces. No one is safe, despite titling or, even, tenure, from these disruptive and life-changing administrative decisions. Imagine what it is like for the 60 percent of us who hold contingent positions. We've all heard those stories too.

"Why do we put up with it?" I hear you ask. I can only answer for myself, but this is the work that I want to do and love to do. This work does change lives. This work makes better people. I have always believed that writing centers are a keen solution to one of the problems of academia and managed higher education neo-liberal spaces: the tendency to conglomerate students in some sort of misguided industrial model and "stack 'em deep" to "educate 'em cheap." Writing centers, writ large, provide students with an essential, one-to-one relationship with a tutor that the ideal composition class of even 15-20 students cannot, and the more typical composition class size of 25 plus—certainly cannot, though it pales in comparison to lecture hall classes of 300 or more students. Writing centers

also provide students with the opportunity to work as peer tutors; the very same opportunity I was afforded in graduate school. The growth that I have witnessed in peer tutors over the length of my career is tangible and I document it. The same goes for the work that student writers do in our centers with those peer tutors.

As I'm entering the last decade of my career, I am still energized by the thought of coming to work every morning and working with students, tutors, staff, and faculty. I look forward to doing program reviews to understand where the center can grow, adapt, and change to meet the changing needs of students. I look forward to teaching new sets of peer tutors, and learning from them since, as Freire said, "There is, in fact, no teaching without learning" (p. 31). I also honestly am looking forward to my new/old director status having a positive impact on how the center functions at my institution. My new supervisor has already been working with me to get an assistant director in place and to increase tutors' hourly wages. I will, though, remain contingent. I will never have tenure nor faculty status.

I was going to leave you hanging with that last line, like I've been left hanging there in my career, but in the interests of the possibility of change, I'll ask the question: what can we do? First, I say we need to organize for collective action. Yes, I do mean organize as in unionize. In states like mine, where such organizing is nearly impossible—and in some states, it has been made illegal for public higher ed workers to unionize—it doesn't mean that we cannot be in touch with our colleagues working at our institutions in different departments to collectively redress problems. I'm currently working on building these across my institution. It is not necessarily easy, but I've made a few close colleagues who are willing to speak out against inequities that we see and take public action. We can also use these intra-institutional collaborations to address conditions that may block our collective advancement. Speaking out against unfair evaluation practices, for example, did catch the attention of our accreditation body, and featured highly in their report.

Next, I think our professional writing center organizations can do far more to address labor and the issues of contingency. Our writing center organizations should have clear guidance on fair labor practices for writing center workers of all types: from peer tutors to writing center professionals. Our organizations need to focus on the people who do this work, not just on how they do this work. Furthermore, scholars (and there is a growing number of them) need to explore our working conditions and provide insight. We also need to be open and willing to share our employment status with each other across the profession. For years I kept that status hidden—and I'm still doing that here in this article—but over the last ten years, I've been openly sharing my story, and some of you might even recognize me from it. That's fine. I've explained why I am not sharing my identity in print, but I still hope that this story can help us come together.

Finally, we as individual writing center workers are the ones who are going to have to do this work. I know we're overloaded already, and would rather focus

on our students, staff, our centers, but we also have to focus on ourselves and our working conditions. We need to be the ones who strive for change. We do that best together.

References

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