

## Chapter 4. The Untold Stories, The Hard Truths

As we close Act I, we need to address the proverbial elephant in the room; we believe it is critical that we be honest about our working conditions. Writing center professionals generally persist for five to seven years on average in the field, which means that there are a lot of people cycling into and out of jobs and our field at any given moment (unpublished data, Giaimo et al.). At the same time, unpublished data about the job market shows that jobs in the field are becoming more professionalized into staff roles and moving off the tenure track under “big tent” academic centers or learning commons models (Driscoll et al., 2017). If data—albeit unpublished data, in part—are showing the challenges in our field that we are currently facing, how are we going to prepare people for this field without acknowledging the deep hard truths about many of the lived experiences of people who take up writing center positions today? The current landscape we are preparing new professionals for is completely unlike anything that higher education has seen, even considering the 2008 financial collapse. Therefore, it would be unethical for us not to address this directly.

We thus share some questions here, offering some ways forward in Act III: How do practitioners in more stable positions leverage their privilege to make people in less stable positions have more equitable and flourishing work? How do we work towards addressing the gaps between the haves and the have-nots in our profession? How do we create organizations that represent the material realities of our profession? In what follows, particularly in Act III, we answer these and other questions. But the stories in Act II also grapple with these and related questions. They speak of the very real ways in which precarity, multiple reportage lines, retrenchment, and the loss of budgetary/supervisory oversight create all kinds of personal and professional trauma (e.g., anonymous narratives such as “From Dream Job to Unsustainable,” “Writing Center as Life Raft,” and “Counter Story: Ignored Labor”). At the same time, contributors also speak of the ways in which they can advocate from positions of less precarity to create more stable and fair workplaces for student and professional tutors (Anonymous’s “Into and out of the Tutoring Center,” Whiddon’s “. . . at least for now’: A Story About Undergraduate Writing Centers and Labor Compensation in Five Parts,” Tirabassi’s “Advocating for Equitable Tutor Pay with Campus Partners,” and Anthony’s “Benefits and Drawbacks of Hiring Professional Academic Tutors”).

Some of the themes we see emerging in these stories—from those who are most senior in our field and who are reflecting back on illustrious careers that span decades to those who are just entering this field trying to navigate their first jobs, or those who are in the “sandwiched generation” that came of age with less austerity and precarity but have seen major shifts in their work with the rise of the managed

university. There are very real differences in the working lives of those who entered the field decades ago and those who are coming into the field now. As the data shared above notes, we ought to prepare those entering the profession for how the managed university has reshaped the structure, reportage, and even lines associated with writing centers. While there are often many jobs (we write this in late fall 2023 where only *two* assistant-professor level tenure line writing center director positions have been posted), many of these jobs are less stable, less prestigious, and pay less. As readers explore the stories in Act II, we ask them to consider the material realities that are constructed through these narratives. Most will not address the managed university, austerity, or neoliberalism directly, but these themes are throughlines that appear in many of the stories in this book. Stories of good-hearted and dedicated people doing more at their work with less. Stories of excited and well-trained people struggling when their expertise is not recognized. Stories of individuals who have joy and pleasure in the work of training tutors, teaching writing, and supporting writers, but who struggle with the endless rotation of administrators who do not welcome them to the decision-making table. It is in these tensions between joy and grief, between dedication and frustration, between power and powerlessness that we most productively engage.

## Looking to the Future (Conclusion)

We hope this project helps to shape labor studies as scholarly inquiry and praxis in our field in the years to come. There has not yet been as comprehensive a collection of stories about writing center labor, or a book that offers explicit guidance to labor organizing and anti-capitalist frameworks in our field. As the companion archive to this project develops, this collection of stories will hopefully grow. Perhaps, as part of your own research and/or teaching, you will contribute stories about writing center labor. At the same time, we recognize the need to move beyond researching and theorizing writing center labor, as important as these activities are. We need to create a set of actions and heuristics that will help to guide new writing center workers as they embark on their professional careers and help those already in the field locate their own labor praxis and values. Implicit within all of this is the larger goal of engaging in labor advocacy and activism. Perhaps another goal is to raise consciousness. To share stories and swap experiences with the hope that information sharing shows that we are not alone in the work that we do. Act III, with its focus on advocacy, action, and praxis, and the interchapters in Act II, will help to guide these endeavors.

There is a fascination with work in our national consciousness. This is not a new trend. When Terkel (1974) published *Working*, it became a bestseller and later a musical featured on Broadway (one of our co-authors starred in *Working* the musical in high school!). But oral histories about how people work—from telephone operators to mechanics to flight attendants to one of the first Black police officers in Chicago—struck nerves and piqued interest. The sharing of stories

impacting workplace conditions and worker sentiment did not just happen in the 1970s, it has happened as long as a labor movement has existed in the United States (and abroad), which has been for centuries. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Eugene V. Debs created a railway workers union and in response to dangerous working conditions, low wages, and extractive company town prices, decided to strike. To do this, he brought Jennie Curtis, a seamstress, to tell her story of Pullman wage theft (she paid 9 or more of her 10-dollar wage for Pullman room and board) to the ARU, which began a history-changing ARU-led boycott of handling Pullman equipment (Mesle, 2021). Stories, in a very real sense, can sway the behavior of thousands of workers and create solidarity for worker movements. They can also, however, break apart along racial lines, as the ARU did when it voted to become a whites-only union. Therefore, the stories we hear are just as critical to labor consciousness as the ones we do not.

Perhaps it is because most of us work. Perhaps because of the complex feelings and positionalities that we have with respect to our work. Perhaps because hearing from workers who could be our relatives, friends, neighbors, and colleagues prompts us to empathize, commiserate, and join with others. In a very real sense, we believe stories can change working conditions and bargaining power. Stories—even difficult or sad ones—can inspire us to collective action, empathy, and change; these stories also show us that we are not alone as we ponder what is, for many of us, an existential but no less visceral search for “daily meaning and daily bread” in our work, as Terkel (1974) noted in the Foreword of *Working* (xi). We hope that this book can generate similar conversations, trace people’s experiences, stand as a record, and also be a playbook that pushes back against extractive and exploitative workplaces and professional systems.

The current labor trends (and thus the contents of this project) can seem dire, yet we do not wish to discourage newcomers to the field and profession. This work *can* be enriching and even fun as this project’s story “Keep Writing Centers Weird” demonstrates so well. Even for all its tumult, as Arlie Hochschild (2013) has pointed out, “One can enjoy emotional labor immensely . . . provided one has an affinity for it and a workplace that supports that affinity” (p. 25). We can take pride in our efforts in the deeply interpersonal work we do, in the sense of mastery that can come with learning to do a difficult job well, and in developing the empathy and resilience emotional labor requires of us. But emotional laborers, as Hochschild (2013) observed, can also face a paradox in that the job can also involve trying to protect clients, patients, students, and such from “the harm of life in a broken, globalized, over-bureaucratized, or profit-hungry system” (p. 30) leading to burnout or worse. Rather than accepting things as they are, then, she recommends *fixing the broken system* (p. 31). In such a world—demanding as it is—emotional labor could be fulfilling and fun. We would extend this by asserting that there can be joy (and fun) in the metalabor of fixing the system. We hope our readers find some clear-eyed optimism in that belief, as well.