

# Chapter 7. *Curriculum Vitae*: An Alternative History

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**Director of the Cooperative Learning Center's Writing and Reading Center, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, 1992:** I started my teaching career as a writing center tutor back in 1986 while pursuing my MA in creative writing and a high school English teaching credential. Some six years later, my wife and I would be moving to the Boston area so that she could start a tenure-stream job, and I would begin an education doctoral program. My application for this position was pitched on the basis of my experience as a writing center tutor and then another three years of adjunct teaching, largely developmental writing in community colleges in California and Maryland. I needed income, and directing a writing and reading center seemed like a reasonable goal. Why not give it a shot?

Dear Mr. Lerner:

I am writing to advise you that the committee determined other applicants had experience and qualifications more appropriate to the needs of the position.

**Writing Faculty/Writing Center position, Merrimack College, 1995:** Three years into my Ed.D. degree, I was getting anxious about my employment prospects post-graduation and was filled with dread of a career as a permanent adjunct/contingent faculty member after six years of such teaching gigs. I had committed myself to writing center work, pursuing dissertation research on a writing center on campus. And I was bound to the Boston area, given my wife's academic career.

Dear Professor Lerner:

I write to inform you that we recently filled the Writing Faculty/Writing Center position for which you applied.

**Director of Writing Programs, Wheelock College, 1995:** Sure, this position was a bit of a reach, but my graduation was looming. I needed a full-time job.

Dear Dr. Lerner:

We have reviewed your application, and we regret to inform you that we have offered the position to a candidate whose qualifications more closely fits our present needs.

**Director of the Bryant College Learning Center, 1996:** When one finishes a degree program, particularly a doctoral degree, one looks for a job. And not just any

job, but one that seemed relevant to my experience and aspirations. The Ed.D. I completed that year in literacy, language, and cultural studies seemed ill-suited (if not making me downright unemployable) for tenure-stream positions in an English department, particularly the ones in the Boston area that seemed like relatively closed shops, given my mixed success with finding adjunct positions in the four years I had lived in Boston up to that time. And faculty positions in teacher education also seemed out of reach with my lack of experience teaching K-12. Sure, it was a leap from being newly credentialed to running a college learning center, but applications did not take much physical energy, just the need to cushion the psychic blow of rejection.

Dear Mr. Lerner:

I regret that you were not among the applicants considered in the final pool of candidates. Although your credentials are excellent, there were a large number of highly qualified candidates.

**Skills Instructor, University of Massachusetts Boston, 1996:** Sure, the idea of a “skills” instructor did not exactly fit with the critical pedagogy vibe I inhabited (sorry, Professor Freire!), but I needed a full-time job. I wasn’t going to be choosy about titles.

Dear Mr. Lerner:

I’m sorry to say that the Search Committee has selected another candidate for the position of Skills Instructor. Your qualifications are impressive; the decision was not an easy one.

**Coordinator of Graduate ESL Tutorials, Bentley College, 1996:** My days as a graduate student were nearly over, and I did teach 9<sup>th</sup>-grade English as a second language as a student teacher in my first semester of my secondary ed credential program, as well as having had many multilingual students in the first-year writing classes I taught as an adjunct. Why not apply?

Dear Dr. Lerner:

Your qualifications are impressive, and the members of the ESL search committee appreciate your interest in Bentley. Other applicants, however, offered different combinations of strengths more suited to our needs.

**Associate Director of the College Writing Program, Boston University, 2001:** At this point, I am five years post-doctoral degree, far enough into my first full-time faculty role as Writing Programs Coordinator/Writing Center Director at a college of pharmacy and health sciences, that I wondered what else was possible. It wasn’t so much that I was unhappy with my job—it’s just that I could see that new opportunities were limited, that my conflicts with administration over the student newspaper (to which I was faculty advisor), a classic struggle between

student autonomy and free speech versus administrative imperative to keep tight control of its brand, all of which led me to explore alternatives. Plus, I was familiar with this program, having taught for it as an adjunct in my last semester of grad school. That would give me a leg up, right?

Dear Dr. Lerner:

After careful review of the many excellent applications we received for this job, we are sorry to inform you that we are unable to pursue your candidacy.

**Director of Writing, Brandeis University, 2002:** Another year into my position at the pharmacy college, I wondered even more strongly about other possibilities, particularly ones that, in the job ad at least, seemed more straightforward than my involvement with anything having to do with writing at the pharmacy college (Run the writing center? Check. Coordinate first-year writing? Check. Attend to writing in the disciplines? Check. Administer a writing proficiency exam? Check. Advise the student newspaper? Check.). And six years post-completion of my doctoral degree, I hopefully had developed skills and strengths that would seem attractive to other employers.

Dear Dr. Lerner:

We have narrowed our choice to a small number of candidates whose strengths are in areas we feel we most need at this time. I regret that we must now eliminate all other applications, including yours, from consideration.

**Director of the Writing Program, Northeastern University, 2009:** Well, I did leave the pharmacy college in 2002 for a position teaching in a writing across the curriculum program at a STEM-focused institution. I was a full-time, non-tenure stream lecturer, reasonably happy with the work but still curious about the world beyond. Could I scratch the itch of a position on the tenure track in an actual English department (which I had only experienced as an adjunct; at the pharmacy college, I was in a department or arts & sciences with just as much contact with my math colleagues as with my teaching writing colleagues)? Could I position myself as having full-time and tenure-stream faculty writing program director chops after a career up to that point that included eight years as an adjunct, 12 years in non-tenure-stream roles, and a doctorate in education?

Dear Professor Lerner:

We have concluded our search for the position of Director of the Writing Program in the English Department at Northeastern. . . . We thank you for your interest, and wish you luck in all of your endeavors.

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My thick folder of rejection letters, such as the ones I excerpt from here, is likely not unusual for an academic who's been around for as long as I have (though now those letters likely come in electronic form). It's well known that contingency, relatively inexpensive labor, and the financial precarity of U.S. higher education are long-standing forces, particularly in the teaching of writing (one letter that I do not have is when funding for a writing program administrator position I had applied to was pulled the night before my on-campus interview). And for me and for writing faculty as a whole, the need to make a living, the mysterious "fit" between one's credentials and experiences and the vagaries of search committees, the wondering if the next job will be better (or at least different) than the current one, the limits of geographic and financial mobility—these more personal forces are powerfully in play.

That my employment endeavors would, two years after that last rejection letter, bring me back to Northeastern University as English department faculty member and writing center director was not something I anticipated in 2009. And that I have most recently occupied the position of English department chair and see retirement as the next phase of my career rather than another faculty or administrative job were also seemingly abstract at that point. Certainly, the story of my job history is one of success and of privilege. And while I recognize the latter in particular, I still wonder about those positions I applied to that garnered nothing more than boilerplate rejection letters. I'm not bitter about those, just curious as to how things would have turned out had I been able to pursue those alternative histories. That seemingly random quality to one's career trajectory is truly frightening, given persistent narratives of "get your Ph.D., get your tenure-stream position, publish your first book, secure tenure." How can I now, as a faculty mentor to MA and Ph.D. students, advise students that the outcome is often out of their control, subject to economic, political, social, and educational forces that might overwhelm their intentions?

We all have these alternative histories captured in letters or emails or multiple versions of our CVs and resumes. They disrupt dominant, comforting narratives of "success" in higher education, whether as a writing teacher or writing center/writing program director. They are the cautionary tales that the next generation of academics needs to hear. Perhaps that's an eyes-wide-open starting point to countering those larger forces or at least trying to. Higher education is changing rapidly, and what might be "traditional" is only true for an increasingly shrinking student and faculty population. How do we prepare ourselves and others for that precarity? Sure, "change is constant," as some high-paid consultant would likely say, but that does not make it easier to endure, less cruel, and more forgiving. Our alternative CVs are a testament to the presence and force of change, of realizing that stability is likely the exception, and that academic careers are never a single story neatly curated on a *curriculum vitae*.