

Theme I. Career Trajectories and Labor

Despite being primarily about labor, many of the submissions we received read as career retrospectives in many ways, so much so that they began to appear as a sort of microgenre among the selections. These career retrospectives vary greatly but what comes through most of them is either the excitement to create something new (such as Harris, this collection), or as in Lerner's piece in this collection, or what happens when possible work futures are denied because of the competitiveness of the labor market. Of course, movement is an important element in writing center work—people move into and out of jobs frequently in our profession. In “My Writing Center Side Hustle,” the anonymous contributor talks about leaving the field for a tenure track position only to find themselves working for the writing center for free. Harris also describes the “volunteer” culture of early writing centers as both a unifying catalyst to produce change but also a behavior borne out of institutional necessity and, even then, austerity.

Most of us likely remember our first job—the excitement, the anxiety, the dreams, and goals for our work. In several submissions in this section, the contributors recall their experiences with new writing center jobs or leaving jobs for work both inside and outside of the field (Johnston, Cheatle, Anonymous's “From Dream Job to Unsustainable,” this collection). Many of these stories, such as Cheatle's or Lerner's, speak to the impact of the market forces of neoliberalism on academic workers. These include hyper-mobility, regional competition, and limited tenure stream and promotion opportunities that are increasingly affecting what positions are available and showcase the competition to secure them. In this collection, Hallman Martini talks about searching for meaning (and better futures) in writing center work but from an academic and writing standpoint. She details the history of establishing a new peer-reviewed journal that combats hyperrevision and over-work in the peer review process.

We open this section with Harris' narrative about growing an academic field, because it encapsulates so well working conditions and labor at the beginning of a career and the professionalization of a field. It also speaks to many of the other themes in Act II, demonstrating how much of the field's progress is predicated on contingent labor and on the metalabor of advocacy. In turn, this section ends with one practitioner's story of leaving the field after realizing the labor of advocacy became too unsustainable. We ask, as in each thematic interchapter, readers to bring their own themes, questions, theoretical lenses, and more to the narratives in this theme. We also provide questions to help facilitate discussion and holistic consideration of the stories here and throughout Act II in the other subsections.

Discussion Questions

- What does Harris' narrative about starting a writing center offer us in terms of arguments of austerity and their influence on writing center culture? What echoes do we see in the current academic climate? What are some of the substantive differences?
- What sorts of testimony or storying do Lerner's rejection letters offer in terms of our narratives about work in the field? What is seemingly valued in these positions? In what ways do Lerner's experiences mirror, affirm, or challenge Wynn Perdue et al.'s (2017) observations reviewing 11 years' worth of job ads that "The most important trend is the inconsistency of expectations and rewards across different institutions" and that "key information about the nature of the job rarely was provided. In many cases, ads lacked enough information for a prospective applicant to understand the nature of the job" (p. 284)?
- "My Writing Center Side Hustle" explores aspects of professional identity alongside labor, compensation, and university configuration. In particular, many writing center practitioners may regard their center work as a form of social or institutional capital providing them academic work and institutional legitimacy—though perhaps not enough material compensation—in ways their schooling alone may not. What other counterstories about writing center labor and legitimacy can be gleaned from narratives like this?
- In some ways, Hallman Martini's narrative reflects an aspect of her career in founding The Peer Review. In others, it speaks to the complicated relationship between writing centers, scholarship, and labor. What does Hallman Martini's narrative offer in terms of examples of invisible work and metalabor around the work of scholarship and writing for writing center professionals? What kinds of emotional labor go into reviewing and editing for publication? How does "hyper-revision" reflect or extend the already-existing complexities writing center administrators have in seeking legitimacy?
- Cheatle's narrative echoes larger stories and tropes around academic nomads—teachers and scholars who uproot several times in order to progress their careers (or escape stagnating careers), often relocating across the country or even internationally. In what ways does Cheatle's narrative reflect what is perhaps unique to writing center workers?
- What does Sockwell Johnston's experience going from peer tutor to faculty writing center director tell us about how we prepare aspiring tutors and graduate students for the work of administration? What relationships do you see between her leadership and her service?
- As mentioned earlier in the project, half of the subjects of *Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* left the field. In what ways does the

anonymous “From Dream Job to Unsustainable” contextualize this trend? How does this narrative reflect some of the job creep, duty ambiguity, and institutional uncertainty that appears in some of the other narratives in this section?

- The theme of this section—that of the intersection between career trajectories and labor—is not expansive. As you read other thematic sections, what other connections do you see reflected in these narratives? What patterns or themes emerge from this section on its own that the contributors have not commented on?