

## Book Reviews

Securing Composition's Disciplinarity: The Possibilities for Independent Writing Programs and Contingent Labor Activism

**A Minefield of Dreams: Triumphs and Travails of Independent Writing Programs**, edited by Justin Everett and Christina Hanganu-Bresch. UP of Colorado, 2017. 375 pp.

**Labored: The State(ment) and Future of Work in Composition**, edited by Randall McClure, Dayna V. Goldstein, and Michael A. Pemberton. Parlor Press, 2017. 324 pp.

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For some time, composition has struggled to declare an identity separate from “English.” For instance, in 1987 Stephen North noted that unlike other knowledge-making disciplines (i.e., literary studies) with, what he calls, “methodological homogeneity” (North 367), composition often sits on the periphery in English departments. Still regularly viewed as lacking content knowledge, writing professionals are frequently characterized as teachers of general skills. Outside the profession, even in our own departments, little is known about what we know, what we do, and how we do it. While recent scholarship, particularly Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle’s *Naming What We Know*, has begun to settle this question of what we know as a discipline, what remains is how we enact this epistemological question through “methodological ... axiological, pedagogical, and processual” modes (Fulkerson 681). As we continue to define who we are and what we know, we must now consider how we might sustain the disciplinary identity we have attempted to articulate as a field. The books reviewed in this essay offer ways to foster such a disciplinary identity in strategic ways. The first, *A Minefield of Dreams: Triumphs and Travails of Independent Writing Programs*, edited by Justin Everett and Cristina Hanganu-Bresch, illustrates how Independent Writing Programs (IWPs) can establish a concrete, identifiable presence for writing on and across campuses. By developing the curriculum in fyw and undergraduate writing programs, IWPs are able to move beyond the field’s writing-as-skill typecasting. The other collection, *Labored: The State(ment) and Future Work in Composition*, edited by Randall McClure, Dayna V. Goldstein, and Michael A. Pemberton, argues for data-centered discussions around contingent labor activism in the twenty-first century. While labor conditions

and IWP might be considered separately, they converge to illuminate that our future must invest in the people who teach in and ultimately sustain our discipline.

Published in 2002, *Field of Dreams* addressed the “‘what-ifs’ and ‘if-onlys,’ in which compositionists imagine professional lives institutionally separate from an English department” (Crow and O’Neill 2). Fourteen years later, *A Minefield of Dreams* reflects a substantially different world, where these hypothetical what-ifs have morphed into (mostly) attainable realities. In their introduction, Justin Everett and Cristina Hanganu-Bresch position the IWP as a way to “achieve a higher disciplinary status” (9). An IWP, they propose, provides ways to secure “legitimacy and equality with other programs” (9). In these cases, as writing specialists we can control the fyw curriculum, a luxury that is not always afforded to us in literature-dominated English departments. In separating from English, IWPs must consider the obstacles associated with quests for independence: How can we establish an identity within the university, counter institutional perceptions that writing instruction is a “how to” pedagogy, and ensure program sustainability? Independent writing programs can wield their power to promote writing studies in the university. Writing studies, then, is able to become recognizable on university campuses, convincing other departments, including English, to see “that what we do is valuable” (ix). In other words, writing studies becomes more legitimate through a departmental presence.

*Minefield’s* first section, “Mythos,” narrates various histories of IWPs, featuring programs that foster cross-disciplinary collaborations as a way to increase the visibility of writing on campuses. Dan Royer and Ellen Schendel explain, for instance, that the Department of Writing at Grand Valley State operates as an academic unit lateral to English, uniting faculty in writing studies, creative writing, and professional and technical writing. While the authors acknowledge that the inclusion of creative writing in an IWP might not be feasible everywhere, a creative writing partnership further focuses writing classes on textual production and draws undergraduate students to the writing major. Keith Hjortshoj, similarly, explains that the Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines at Cornell has historically employed an interdisciplinary model for writing instruction outside of English. At Cornell, writing instruction is the responsibility of everyone, across the different colleges, echoing contemporary wishes of Writing Across the Curriculum initiatives. Cornell offers “an ‘interdependent’ program, valuable and valued because it helps teachers to solve problems they care about, with strategies we’ve learned from other teachers in other fields” (80). Hjortshoj reminds us that, at its core, “writing” isn’t owned by anyone and “what we know and do as composition specialists will depend

on our grasp of what other disciplinary and cross-disciplinary specialists currently know and do” (83).

Essays in the subsequent section, “Topoi,” focus on the ongoing development of writing teachers as a key component to the continual professionalization of writing studies. W. Brock MacDonald, Margaret Procter, and Andrea L. Williams’ “Integrating Writing into the Disciplines” report on the IWP at the University of Toronto, “a program that works across disciplines and is not limited to its own departmental perspective or structure” (111). Toronto’s Writing Instruction for Teaching Assistants (WIT) presents a WAC-centered perspective where “students must learn to write within their disciplines” (114). Participating departments receive funding for one Lead Writing Teaching Assistant (LWTA), who serves as a writing and pedagogical consultant for faculty in that department. These LWTAs are mentored by the WIT Coordinator, a full-time writing specialist. The authors explain that the “hub” of communication between the LWTA, course instructors, and the WIT Coordinator has shifted the culture of writing from “student deficiency to one that emphasizes teaching responsibilities” (125). In chapter six, Georgia Rhoades, Kim Gunter, and Elizabeth Carroll focus our attention on contingent faculty advocacy in their current struggle for independence at Appalachian State. They reveal trials and tribulations related to integrating non-tenure track faculty (NTT) in department life but insist that the professionalization of NTTs must be a priority in the turbulent quest for independence. On their campus, NTT faculty attend professional development opportunities led by visiting scholars.

As a way to sustain our programs and discipline, the section “Techne” directs our attention to pedagogical approaches employed in IWPs. Michelle Filling-Brown and Seth Frechie discuss the process for developing a vertical model of writing instruction that “inscribes justice” throughout an intensive writing sequence at Cabrini University. When the curriculum reforms of the 1980s were reevaluated in the early 2000s, the demand for a more centralized writing education became apparent. This led the IWP at Cabrini to replace the lateral English department-WAC initiative with a vertical model of writing instruction. The vertical model includes a freshman-level class focused on issues of power, privilege, and difference, a sophomore-level class that “require[s] a service-learning component that allows students to reflect upon the college social justice mission in light of real world realities” (186), and a junior-level class that develops understandings from the sophomore-level class to civically engage with systemic issues often through community-based research. The strong connections across the courses represent the “attempt to move writing and an informed understanding of justice and inclusivity center stage” (192). In chapter nine, Christina Hanganu-Bresch describes the implementation of a writing about writing (WAW) pedagogy, a pedagogical movement that fosters

the “disciplinary integrity” (197) of writing studies and promotes transfer by making writing and rhetoric studies the content of first-year writing (fyw). She explains that rhetorical education might productively enrich WAW because both “aim to educate rhetorically-skilled citizens who can understand, assess, and adapt their communication to a variety of circumstances” (207). The rhetorical dexterity promised in a WAW-rhetorical education focused fyw class allows teachers of writing to encourage communicators to reassess their own rhetorical situations.

The final chapters focus on the transformative nature of IWPs achieved by creating and managing an identity on campus. Valerie Ross explains that transforming the discipline does not just happen; instead, it must be brought into existence and managed. She examines how identity must be conceptualized as a social fact in order for an IWP to “create a durable, recognizable identity that propels the organization toward becoming a social fact” (247). Ross invites us to envision IWPs as ongoing identity projects, where all interactions communicate this identity, concretizing the IWP into existence. Keeping in line with Ross’s thesis that transformations ought to be managed, Justin Everett’s chapter describes the “strategic planning” for University of the Sciences’ writing programs, including branding, generating a mission statement, and developing a strategic plan. Everett recounts the “frustrating” (279) process of drafting, assessing, and revising a strategic plan that “sold” the identity of the writing program. The plan aligned with institutional outcomes and objectives. Such assessments enabled the “market” (e.g., students) and “shareholders” (e.g., administrators and other faculty members) to understand what the writing program is doing and what it accomplishes. In many ways, branding, mission statements, strategic plans, and assessments are ways to make the identity of an IWP a concrete, identifiable reality. Lastly, William Lalicker proposes that transformations do not have to be splits and separations, but that mutual respect between literature and composition can exist in English departments. He theorizes what he calls the “five equities” for composition to exist in harmony within English: hiring, governance, writing and rhetoric as core components of the English major; writing studies specialization and graduate studies as key elements in rhetoric and composition. He reminds us that disciplinary harmony benefits our students by “serv[ing] [them] with the best practices our discipline offers” (319). Ultimately, *A Minefield of Dreams* advances practical ways to sustain composition’s disciplinarity, including the ongoing development of teachers in the program, innovative pedagogical and curricular design, and program identity management.

The co-edited collection *Labored*, alternatively, centers around the 1989 *Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing*. The *Statement* sought “to examine the conditions which undermine the quality

of postsecondary writing instruction” (329) and was the first attempt, after the *Wyoming Resolution*, to make visible unfair working conditions for writing teachers without a tenure appointment. Even in 2018, it’s no surprise that working conditions for NTT professionals have remained, as the *Statement* declares, “the worst scandal in higher education” (330). NTT teaching positions typically offer limited if any job security, office space, material resources, and opportunities to participate in professional governance—as such, faculty in these positions are forced to accept an “itinerant existence” (330). As Joseph Harris notes in his afterword, the *Wyoming Resolution* is a “labor grievance” (285) while the *Statement* is leveraged as “providing a quality education” (286). He goes on to suggest that the *Statement* reflects a “sense that teaching writing is a true profession” (286). The professionalization of composition studies provides a reason why the *Statement* boldly supports tenure as a disciplinary imperative. *The Statement* functions, then, as an emblem of disciplinarity and, in many ways, attempts to counter many of the same institutional beliefs about the teaching of writing that IWPs have battled, including the traditional notion that anyone can teach writing.

The problem, however, for McClure, Goldstein, and Pemberton was that the *Statement* needed revisions for the twenty-first century. Chapters in *Labored* focus on the *Statement* as a text-in-progress, one needing further focus on part-time faculty. Such a focus, it seems, was absent from the 2013 revision of the *Statement*, which condensed mention of labor conditions to a two-paragraph bullet late in the document. In many ways, the collection takes the form of a call-to-action, pleading for specific data-driven arguments that respond to the reality of contingent labor in the twenty-first century. Framed through Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyticha’s concept of the “loci of the preferable,” the editors’ final chapter calls for empirical data to operationalize labor improvements. Using quantitative data, administrators can establish a research agenda that advocates for improved contingent faculty labor conditions. “A concrete research agenda” (282), they argue, is central, if we are to improve contingent labor conditions. Following their call for concrete research on contingent faculty, the editors provide a “data-enhanced” *Statement*, pointing to research conducted at the national level that substantiates the claims in the 1989 document, ultimately calling for “empirical exemplars of equitable, successful labor conditions” (290). Improving labor conditions and studying labor with an emphasis on quantitative data would allow program administrators to make persuasive arguments “to those who make decisions that directly impact the working conditions of writing instructors” (271).

Section one of *Labored* positions the *Statement* in context, emphasizing the gap between what the *Statement* had hoped to change and realities of the profession in the twenty-first century. As an indirect product of the *Wyoming*

*Resolution*, the *Statement* began to acknowledge the unfair working conditions for part-time faculty who teach writing. In stories about the Wyoming Conference in the summer of 1986 (Trimbur and Cambridge), many remember that discussions about labor conditions were propelled by a graduate student following James Sledd's talk about writing instruction, power, and oppression. Narratives recalling the genesis of the *Resolution* for years referred to this graduate student as the "anonymous graduate student." Susan Wyche, in chapter one, reflects on being the anonymous graduate student who got everyone talking about labor conditions at the Wyoming Conference. While the chapter focuses on the conference, Wyche places the event in context, describing her and a fellow TA being strong-armed at her home institution into teaching an upper-division writing class without pay. Thus, the *Wyoming Resolution* and subsequent arguments for labor conditions remind us how integral graduate student working conditions are in discussions about contingent labor. Further, in the form of a Faustian dialogue, Chris Anson situates the *Statement* as articulating the need for disciplinarity in writing studies, where specialists in composition (not in literature) teach composition classes and pursue research to concretize the discipline. He advocates for initiatives that build in support for NTT faculty, including longer renewable appointments, space and time to work with students, and opportunities for conferencing. Both Valerie Balester (chapter three) and Jeanne Gunner (chapter four) take issue with the *Statement* for its scope and what it represents to professionals in the discipline. Balester's "War on the *Statement*" criticizes the 1989 document's representation of writing centers as mere support services for "actual" (43) classroom teaching. By arguing for an explicit acknowledgment that writing centers are sites of teaching and learning, she proposes that writing center administrators must be thought of as writing program administrators. Balester sees the work of writing centers as serving institutional goals, not departmental ones. To develop the institutional presence of writing centers, revisions of the *Statement* should acknowledge the serious learning and teaching that occur in writing and reading centers. In chapter four, Jeanne Gunner's dissatisfaction with the *Statement* stems from the cycle of revisions the *Statement* has undergone, which has defocused the initial intentions of the *Wyoming Resolution*. She suggests that the *Statement* might be eulogized as a failed model since it subverts "the *Resolution's* original goals and voices in order to serve the interests of the then more culturally-powerful tenure-line professional" (53). By supporting tenure and relegating NTT faculty to lower classes, labor conditions in 2018 seem to be unintentionally perpetuated by the 1989 document. In response, scholars in *Labored* recommend increased departmental governance that includes NTTs, increased pay for NTT faculty, and more stable appointments.

Section two of *Labored* attempts to map labor conditions in the present, ultimately displaying the changed nature of contingent labor in the twenty-first century. The contributors focus their discussions around contingent faculty as a means to integrate teachers into department life and legitimize the teaching of writing. James McDonald locates the *Statement* alongside other professional labor documents from MLA, AAUP, and AWP, urging composition faculty to use the *Statement* in conjunction with these other position statements. Like several scholars surveyed in this review (Anson; Rhoades, Kim, and Carroll; Royer and Schendel), McDonald asks for revisions of the *Statement* that do not “defend tenure at the expense of helping contingent faculty” (86). Instead, he urges institutions to provide space, compensation, and professional respect to those working in our programs. In comparison, Timothy Dougherty widens the scope of “contingent” to include non-tenure track writing program administrators. Through interviewing several NTT administrators, he advises that the *Statement* should provide “benchmarks” for programs to move toward “tenured paradise” (108). His recommendations point to clear job descriptions and a fair evaluation structure. Risa Gorelick, following the overarching purpose of *Labored*, calls for the Research Network Forum (RNF) at CCCC to invite speakers and foster new research ideas about NTT working conditions in order to move the field forward. Following her call, RNF at the 2018 CCCC featured plenary speeches from Seth Kahn and Amy Lynch-Binieck, both of which focused on labor-activism research. In chapter eight, Casie Fedukovich, Susan Miller-Cochran, Brent Simoneaux, and Robin Snead propose that a revision of the *Statement* should address the trend of hiring more NTT than tenure-track faculty. They focus their recommendation around the CCCC *Writing Program Certificate of Excellence*, which, as they note, implicitly supports unethical hiring practices and thereby “normalizes and promotes practices against which many in the discipline are stringently fighting” (139). Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano further direct our attention to two-year colleges and the demands of NTTs serving diverse populations. They endorse a “program mentality where all department members contribute to the program’s development regardless of employment status” (154). Collectively, these scholars advocate for changing the realities of contingent labor in our programs, championing fairer evaluation structures, and fostering more inclusive departmental governances. By fostering the continual development of writing professionals, these changes would continue to challenge pervasive beliefs that writing is a set of skills that anyone can teach.

*Labored*, also, alerts us to the material, technological, and pedagogical changes in our discipline since 1989, drawing our attention to how we might articulate the needs of professionals in the future. The last chapters forecast the possibilities for a revised statement that acknowledges shifts in technology

and pedagogical models. In doing so, contributors offer future directions, not only for contingent faculty activism but also for the discipline. Evelyn Beck, for instance, explains that teaching online is more equitable and even liberating for adjunct faculty. She provides recommendations to foster an inclusive online classroom community. Barry Maid and Barbara D'Angelo offer an alternate scenario for NTT faculty. They overview ways that faculty, curriculum, course load, and evaluation can be leveraged to illustrate that tenure-line jobs are no longer essential, and that we should embrace permanent NTT jobs. They propose that their chapter can be used to recognize and negotiate realities at local institutions. In addition, Maid and D'Angelo advocate for accountable hiring practices by suggesting that "faculty working conditions need to become outcome-based so they, too, can be assessed" (206). As the contributors put forth, labor conditions might be better conceptualized as at the center of our work rather than separate from it. They note that contingent labor activism is inherently linked to our future as a discipline. In developing accountability practices, acknowledging the positive potential for online adjunct instructors, and making visible the realities of contingent labor, we can guide our discipline to a socially just future.

*Labored* and *A Minefield of Dreams* point to the possibilities for institutional transformation that composition can lead and actively engage in. If *Naming What We Know* was the field's attempt to advance our epistemological disciplinary core, then *Labored* and *Minefield* propose ways that we foster this disciplinarity, particularly through investing in those who teach in and ultimately sustain our programs. Independent writing programs provide a place in the university community that acknowledges and recognizes writing studies as a genuine field of study, not just a general education staffing program. However, as we work hard to construct and shift these concrete realities, we must recognize that if we continue to overlook unfair working conditions for contingent faculty, we continue to be part of the problem. Instead, we need to invest in contingent faculty development, offer adequate office space and materials, and provide contingent faculty governance roles in our departments. As we continue to transform our discipline, we must remember that transformations do not always come easy or amount to an ideal situation (i.e., independent writing programs with trained composition specialists all holding tenure-line positions). These volumes remind us that our disciplinarity must be strategically managed, further reminding us that the best resources we have, for our programs and for our students, are the people who work in our programs: devoted teacher-scholars of composition. If we are to dispel myths that anyone can teach writing, if we are to reinvigorate university life with writing across the curriculum, if we are to take up space in the university, then, we need

to continually invest, support, and develop the teachers who teach the most important classes at the university.

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### **Works Cited**

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