Collaboration and Resistance: Academic Freedom and Non-Tenured Labor

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By most recent estimates, the number of full-time non-tenure-track (FT-NTT) faculty is increasing in higher education. While John Barnshaw, the AAUP's director of research and public policy, notes that this latest increase from 12 to 16 percent is tied to economic recession and recovery (as qtd. in AWP's 2015–2016 Report on the Academic Job Market [Tucker]), I would add that the replacement of part-time non-tenure-track (PT-NTT) labor with FT-NTT labor also signals a negotiation of the

FORUM Fall 18

economic imperatives faced by colleges and universities operating in a culture of increasing neoliberalism and a corporatized "growth model." At my own institution, a small state university in southern New England and the site of this study, the creation of FT-NTT lines was also a clear response to the increasingly publicized problems of an outsized reliance on adjunct and other part-time labor, signaling a seemingly altruistic move toward better working conditions for instructors which belied motives of fiscal solvency. Because costs for adjunct faculty fluctuate based on enrollment numbers, lectureships present a "solution" in the form of calculable, stable cost expenditures, which serves universities contending with shrinking enrollments and austerity climates.

At the same time, where the number of available tenure-track (TT) positions is contracting relative to the number of qualified applicants for such positions, more and more of these FT-NTT positions will be filled by PhDs, not only because their academic job-market-ready applications will often outshine those of their MA- holding competitors, but because having a higher percentage of PhDs in the class- room provides a useful selling point for departments and universities. While this may seem a win-win for both parties, simultaneously improving the university's overall profile and providing relatively stable, relatively well-compensated job opportunities in the academy for highly qualified graduates of long and difficult doc- toral programs, it also has the potential to unleash a number of difficult-to-resolve tensions between professional position and professional identity. My institutional case, which investigated a first-year writing program staffed by these full-time lecturers (FTLs) and a few remaining part-time lecturers (PTLs) teaching from a shared, scripted curriculum, sought to understand particularly those tensions which were located at the intersection of autonomy/academic freedom and institutional rank. I know that my experience, while particular to my institutional configuration in many ways, and particular to the choices made by the department and acting WPA, illuminates concerns central to the endeavor of teaching and scholarship more broadly. I consider here, as the AAUP's 1940 Statement does, that academic freedom ex- tends not only beyond research to teaching, but also, I contend, beyond those who are *recognized* for their research, to those whose institutional rank concerns itself primarily with teaching and service.

Local Conditions and National Conversations

Comparing TT and NTT experiences, Molly Ott and Jesús Cisneros note that a "sense of freedom and personal responsibility over one's work . . . has long been a core value of American academic work," which includes "how [instructors] teach their courses, and how they serve their institutions and professions" (6). Writing

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FORUM Fall 18

programs tend to impose a great degree of intra-program curricular homogeneity, and despite their full-time status, instructors are, as Richard and Rebekah Shultz- Colby point out, "often reliant on a director or administrator and strategic decisions from upper-level university administrations" (67). Without an institutionalized research agenda over which to exercise a "sense of freedom and responsibility over one's work" (Ott and Cisneros 6), I wondered: would PhD instructors experience the lack of such freedom in the classroom as an affront to hard-won professional identities historically entwined with an autonomy derived from hard-earned expertise?

At my institution, of the ten new FTLs hired to staff the newly configured first- year English (FYE) program, nine either had PhDs or were in the final stages of completing them, but these degrees were in literature, not composition. Meanwhile, the English department had hired a new TT professor, part of whose job in the department was to direct FYE. No (other) TT faculty taught FYE. This new WPA, in her *de facto* supervisory role relative to the other instructors, designed a heavily scripted curriculum, complete with "major" assignments, scaffolding assignments, grading rubrics, semester schedules, and—for first-semester courses—assigned texts. I interviewed a group of those new instructors in order to learn more about how they perceived themselves fitting into the institution and department relative to their own sense of professional identity, and how those feelings shaped and otherwise intersected with their work as instructors both inside and outside the classroom.

Additionally, when FT-NTT labor replaces PT-NTT labor, as happened in our department (not a single existing instructor was hired for an FTL role), we saw a significant loss of institutional expertise and program continuity that resided with the existing PTLs. I conducted interviews with several of the remaining PTLs to understand our programmatic working conditions holistically and to measure their experiences against those of the FTLs who became the focus of this study. The PTLs' sense of professional identity was grounded more in their commitment to and understanding of the university's unique student body than in their academic status or scholarly expertise.

As one variation or another of the FTL model edges toward becoming the new normal in first-year composition and similar programs, I hope my investigation may contribute to a shift from promoting it as an obvious improvement on the adjunct model to some necessary forms of interrogation and critique.

Participants

All of the six instructors I interviewed—three PTLs and three FTLs—taught from a shared curriculum and worked under the same departmental governance, but the

FORUM Fall 18

two groups inhabited very different spaces within the program structure. In addition to working on two-year contracts, FTLs received health insurance and benefits, access to weekly professional development workshops (required as a part of their first year of teaching), and the use of an office where each had a separate cubicle. PTLs in contrast, worked on one-semester to one-year contracts, subject to change based on "departmental needs," and were offered courses based on a seniority model. They had access to health care, some retirement benefits,[1] and an office shared with all PTL instructors in the college, providing significantly less privacy than the space used by the FTLs. While the FTLs were hired to teach a 4/4 course load, PTLs typically taught two or three courses per semester, and most were employed at multiple institutions. Rather than holding PhDs, most had MAs in professional writing or MFAs.

While both teaching pools received observations of their teaching tied to their contract renewal and merit raises, differences in how the two pools were evaluated yearly were significant: FTLs across campus were reviewed by larger departmental faculty evaluation committees made up of tenured faculty in two categories: teaching and advising. They submitted dossiers of information to support their renewal including CVs, student evaluation data, advising records, and course materials. Notably, while scholarship was not an official part of their union contract obligations and did not factor into their evaluation, most actively publishing FTLs included information about their publications in their dossiers. PTLs, on the other hand, were evaluated solely by the TT-WPA in a microcosmic, program-devised system and were then "certified" by the department chair for renewal. They were assessed on teaching alone, based on student evaluations and course materials. While many of them were also actively publishing, their evaluation materials did not provide the opportunity to present that work, even if they wished to.

Findings and Discussion

My discussion below reflects a portion of a larger study with these two groups, which looked broadly at the landscape of labor concerns and inequity in this first- year English program. Here, however, I focus on two pivotal areas of interview data related to concerns of academic freedom. The first involves how instructors measured and assessed their own institutional positioning, in particular as that positioning intersected and at times conflicted with a deeply held sense of professional identity. Not entirely surprisingly, the data shows that feelings of being undervalued or misplaced in the institution often correlated with a perceived lack of autonomy in teaching practices. The second area of data focuses on collaborative practices, which are likely to arise in writing programs where

FORUM Fall 18

instructors teach the same curriculum, but which, in this case, often s(w)erved to support assertions of autonomy and academic freedom in employment conditions that instructors perceived as at least somewhat precarious. These practices, I noted, sometimes seemed compatible with the goals of improving pedagogy and practice and at other times almost indifferent to them.

Institutional Position, Professional Identity

The first-year writing program was taught almost wholly by NTT labor. When it came to FTL experiences, without exception, the FTLs I interviewed characterized their positions as interstitial, in the sense they did not feel like hired mercenaries, entirely ancillary to the institution or the department—a feeling some had experi- enced in previously held adjunct positions—but did not feel like full-fledged mem- bers of the academic community in which they were working either.

One instructor, for example, explained that as an FTL "you find yourself in a space between an hourly teacher and a tenure-track professor, in the sense that you're salaried, you're there all the time, but you're not really seen as an intellectual contributor to the university or the department." A few moments of his interview highlighted this feeling: Over the summer before he started teaching, he received what he and other FTLs characterized as a "giant binder" of curricular materials they were expected to use. He also described the "unpaid August orientation meetings" at which it became clear to him that "my role was to carry out a vision that I hadn't had a whole lot [to do with], and wasn't going to have a whole lot to do with formulating." For him, as with other FTLs I interviewed, this "role" felt largely in- compatible with his professional training and sense of intrinsic professional worth. "It's a bit odd to have a job," he said, "where you have the academic qualifications of some of the tenure-track professors and in some cases, I would say, a more ex- tensive publication resume . . . but to not really be valued at all in that way."

Another FTL, who had completed a PhD just prior to joining the faculty, recalled receiving the binder for the program's "set curriculum about six weeks before the semester started" and described her frustration at discovering just how "set" it was so late in the game. Knowing how little control she would have to shape her own curriculum, she said, "would have shaped [her] thought processes on whether to accept [the job] or not." She described her resentment at having been given what she called a "teacher proof" curriculum, and characterized teaching from that curriculum, rather than "to [her] strengths" and from her own interests and expertise as "not what I think of as college teaching." She even attested to having felt "more valued" at a previous adjunct job where she had the freedom to "tailor the curriculum" accordingly.

FORUM Fall 18

A third FTL similarly recalled that she "wasn't prepared for some of the constraints in the curriculum." While she was far less ill at ease with these constraints than many of her colleagues—mentioning almost in passing that having the freedom to herself select "reading and discussion" materials in second-semester writing classes "seemed to improve the experience of the . . . assigned curriculum"—it is worth noting that she nonetheless saw her position in the department as discontinuous with her graduate education, "where people are working on the same sorts of things" but with "less anxiety built in." If she was comfortable with this discontinuity, it may well have been because she happily identified herself as a teacher above all, rather than as the tenure-track scholar her graduate studies had groomed her to become.

Conversely, none of the PTLs interviewed were overly surprised at the mere fact of having been provided with a scripted curriculum. Indeed, the previous pro- gram director had also provided what one PTL characterized as a "top down" curricular model, "not something we volunteered to do [but] something we had to do." For the PTLs, their resistance was to the content of the curriculum itself. While the FTLs' sense of unease appeared largely connected to the mere fact of having been stripped of autonomy in the one area in which they were recognized and sanctioned by the institution—teaching, PTL complaints were more focused on what they identified as weaknesses in the capacity of this particular curriculum to work productively for the specific student body to which it was being delivered, a population they felt dedicated to serving. One PTL, for example, worried that the new curriculum would not successfully be "useful to [my students] personally or professionally," while another expressed concern that the streamlining of both major assignments in the new curriculum would, by inviting plagiarism, foil her capacity to get her students "actually . . . writing instead of searching around for the writing of others."

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On reflection, I noticed that the PTLs' sense of unease with regard to the scripted curriculum, though somewhat less indexed to freedom and autonomy, was also wrapped up in their sense of professional identity. As longtime employees of the institution, and in some cases graduates of its MA program in professional writing, they identified strongly as teachers: "I know that at the university level we're sup- posed to be scholars first and teachers second, but I'm a teacher," and as teachers,

FORUM Fall 18

in the words of one of them, they "understand the students and program at the university." Insofar as they saw the new curriculum as imperfectly suited to the very particular needs and abilities of *those* students at *that* institution, they collectively felt impaired in their ability to, as one PTL put it, "be the good teacher I know I am."

Their experiences of marginalization had a traceable history and structure, in comparison to the newly arrived FTL instructors. The feelings of instructors in already precarious positions were exacerbated by their relationship with the new curriculum and the hiring of the FTLs. One PTL, for instance, interpreted the department's decision not to hire any experienced PTLs for the new FTL lines as having been (she guessed) "driven by the desire to get people to follow an exact, prescriptive curriculum." A second PTL, someone who had received her MA from the institution, attributed it to what she herself characterized as intellectual snobbery. "They value the PhD, they don't even value . . . the MFA," she remarked. She went on to describe her working conditions as an "environment which has become, just, basic, fear."

Collaboration as Resistance

Some measure of resistance to or uneasiness with the curricular strictures imposed on them was nearly universal among the FTLs interviewed for this project, and none felt entirely comfortable simply asserting their purported academic freedom and teaching to their own strengths, from their own interests, or as they saw fit. In general, this discomfort derived from the fact that though they enjoyed full-time salaries and benefits and were working on two-year contracts, they wondered if making changes to the curriculum would have consequences on their renewal.

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One remarked, "It's hard not to feel concerned about consequences, particularly when you don't have a contract beyond the next year."

Along these lines, the same FTL who characterized teaching from a scripted curriculum as not what she thought of as "college teaching" described her efforts to reclaim some of that autonomy in terms of "thinking about how I can strategically change things but still . . . not change them enough that it will draw attention to me

FORUM Fall 18

. . . I have to think through, like, what can I change [that is] not going to get me in trouble if I get quote-unquote caught . . . and how can I prevent myself from getting caught?" Another FTL, discussing the fact that she hadn't made any modifications to the curriculum during her first two semesters at the institution, said, "I guess I just assumed I couldn't make those changes."

For the FTLs interviewed, collaboration emerged as something of an antidote to and safeguard against the potentially punitive consequences they feared for asserting autonomy. One FTL, for example, explained his decision to work with two col- leagues on what he saw as a valuable redesign of one of the second semester class's "major" assignments as a way to "spread the blame," as a prophylactic against retribution, should he be caught. "No way was I going to make that [change] with- out having partners in crime," he explained, "because if it was a crime . . . we were not as likely to go down for it if we had to go down together, because what are you going to do, lose half your FTLs in one year?" Another discussed collaborating with her colleagues in more informal ways, conversing between cubicles in their shared offices, for example, and explained how learning about the changes some of those colleagues had been collaboratively making to the curriculum emboldened her to go further than she previously had in modifying her own: "After hearing how other people have changed things . . . I have [started to make those changes as well]."

Significant, however, was how these structured and unstructured, formal and informal collaborations at the end of the day seemed to exist as a vehicle to sup- port individuation and a way to reclaim autonomy. The FTL who described seeking strength in numbers before he rewrote a major assignment, for instance (and this was common across participants), emphasized that in the end he and his col- leagues "collaborated on stuff and then went our own way with it because we're different people [with] different strengths"—language that, to me, resonates unmistakably with the ideas of scholarly specialization and expertise on which professorial status, and the autonomy and academic freedom that attend to it, is largely predicated.

PTLs, for their part, noted a rich history of collaborative practice that was interrupted by the new labor configuration, which stripped them of the majority of their collaborators. Interestingly, however, they almost uniformly described making sometimes radical changes to the curriculum, and found the notion of seeking safety in numbers in order to do so laughable. Not only were they aware that as part-time employees they could be replaced without the more time-consuming procedures required for hiring new full-time employees, but they suspected that the department would be more than happy to see them and the baggage they carried over from previous iterations of the first-year writing program go.

FORUM Fall 18

Conclusions

The results of this project that I find most novel and arresting are those that point toward the complexities and possible pitfalls of what is broadly viewed as a positive shift in the writing programs that rely so heavily on NTT teaching labor, from a part- time adjunct employment model to a NTT-FT model that offers greater job security, expanded opportunities for collegiality and collaboration, and stronger institutional identification. I posit that the tensions that appeared in the nexus of autonomy and professional identity at this site reside not only with institutional rank broadly, but also in programmatic ethos, curricular design, and attendant models of managerial- ism, evaluation, and governance.

For the FTLs interviewed, what many saw as fairly favorable working conditions and financial compensation packages were simply not enough to neutralize the frustrations of living daily the dissonance between how they identified as scholar-teachers and how the institution seemed to perceive them. The collaborative energies of ten highly qualified university instructors teaching by and large the same courses to the same student body and working long hours in close proxim- ity, across cubicle dividers, might have been better employed in achieving productive student outcomes and honing best classroom practices. Instead, much of that work was performed in an attempt to simultaneously maintain economic and existential continuity in their professional lives—a striking example of the possible pitfalls of this model. That four of the original ten FTLs hired to teach in the program departed within two years provides another.

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While I absolutely hope more and more writing programs will choose to make the shift from fully contingent labor models to an undeniably fairer full-time lecturer model, my study suggests the importance of articulating that choice in a way that recognizes and honors the laboriously forged and deeply felt professional identities of workers by supporting continued professional development and encouraging autonomy in curricular design. To do so, I posit, would benefit those workers as well as the institutions whose students they will serve: a genuine win-win situation.

Note

1. These benefits were available as a direct result of the organizing efforts of unionized PTL instructors that had taken place several years earlier when they fought to gain contractual rights more equal to those of lecturers and tenure-track faculty.

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