



**TYCA Working Paper #1: Two-Year College English
Faculty Teaching Workload**
Two-Year College English Association
Workload Task Force
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Abstract

In Fall of 2019, the Two-Year College English Association distributed a 39-question survey to two-year college English faculty through professional listservs, regional distribution lists, and social media platforms. We received 1,062 responses to questions about workload in the areas of teaching, service, and professional development. This working paper presents responses to the open-ended question, “What other comments would you like to make about your workload as it relates to teaching?” The responses were coded via a grounded-theory approach and then assessed holistically. The responses describe the affective responses to a heavy workload driven by large class sizes, large teaching loads, and financial insecurity, among other issues.

Overview

The responses describe the teaching workload of two-year college English faculty. The number of sections taught and the number of students in each section have the greatest impact on respondents' working conditions. Two additional factors impact teaching load most greatly. First, administrative policies in conjunction with curricular reforms, often mandated by legislation (for example, AB 705 in California), create an environment in which faculty are required or expected to take on sections beyond their contractual load. Second, financial insecurity: many faculty reported that they were unable to earn a living wage even when teaching many classes or having tenure, earning a full-time salary and teaching their full contractual load. Overall, the responses to the question about teaching and workload paint a picture of unsustainable working conditions for faculty who are tasked with serving the most structurally disadvantaged and minoritized student population of college students.

Literature Review

Since the 1960s, workload and working conditions have been an area of concern for our professional organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) (National; Allen). However, since then, in spite of statements by those organizations articulating recommendations, little has been done to improve working conditions. In fact, we may be losing ground. Raymond Mazurek, in “Academic Labor is a Class Issue,” argues that “college teaching in the United States is rapidly becoming de-professionalized,” where the workforce is now dominated by a “white-collar working class of skilled labor” (353). It’s not hard to connect this with what many are describing as “the neoliberal” higher education environment (Busch), which has applied so-called market logics to higher education resulting in the commodification of teaching and the leveraging of competition for low-paid labor. Recognizing this, the Indianapolis Resolution was proposed and

adopted in 2016 by the Conference on College Composition and Communication as follow up to the 1989 Wyoming Resolution, making similar demands and calls on that organization and other professional organizations to “draw explicit attention to the reality that material conditions are teaching and learning conditions—that current labor conditions undervalue the intellectual demand of teaching, restrict resources such as technology and space to contract faculty, withhold conditions for shared and fair governance, and perpetuate unethical hiring practices—as the central pedagogical and labor issue of our times.”

Under this broad umbrella of “material conditions” of teaching, Amy Lynch-Binieck and Holly Hassel recognize how the “materiality” of working conditions impact the two-year college teacher-scholar-activist in shaping their professional identities, pointedly in their ability to shape, implement, or even resist mandated or needed reforms. As the TYCA White Paper on Placement Reform and the TYCA White Paper on Developmental Education Reform both indicate, faculty-scholars in the two-year college should have control over their material conditions for the betterment of the students, suggesting that, when such control is seized by legislatures or administrations, students suffer. A most obvious example is class size. CCCC recommends writing classes be limited to 20 students for composition courses and 15 for developmental (CCCC), and research supports this. The NCTE statement “Why Class Size Matters” states that “overall, research shows that students in smaller classes perform better in all subjects and on all assessments when compared to their peers in larger classes.” Chris Sorensen’s study of class size in online classes shows how increased class size likely leads to a decline in instructor performance. Sorensen found that, “as class size increases, the instructor’s performance in the areas of instructor feedback and instructor expertise decreases” (151).

However, class size is only one factor in determining teaching workload. The number of students an instructor works with each semester is equally determinant of workload stress. Many faculty, especially contingent faculty, teach 6-6 to 8-8 loads each semester, responsible sometimes for as many as 200 students (Calhoon-Dillahunt 121). This is far beyond the CCCC recommendation of 60 students per term (CCCC). Responding to student writing and engaging with student work meaningfully are fundamental principles in the field. Melanie Lee’s research corroborates a widely held view that an overload of student writers negatively affects an instructor’s ability to respond effectively. Faculty in her study reported that the need to respond quickly to many students meant they truncated responses, did not offer as many open-ended questions (which would themselves require attention), and focused on “what’s wrong” rather than offering formative feedback.

On top of class size and number of students, other research suggests that expectations for service and professional development continues to rise, even as compensation, whether monetary or reassign time, is missing. Edna Martinez found that as two-year colleges begin to add baccalaureate degrees—as many are—the work-related expectations increase and add to an already “contradictory” situation in which high teaching loads are the norm but expectations for service increase as the college expands to meet more student needs. As this “contradictory” situation is exacerbated, two-year college faculty struggle with a work-life balance. Margaret Sallee reports that for community college faculty, balancing work and family life is a “grave concern” (81), a finding supported by Amanda Latz and James Rediger in “Navigating the Water: Community College Faculty and Work-Life Balance.”

In this environment of uncompensated higher workloads, composed of larger classes, greater number of students per semester, and higher expectations for service and professional development in an era of education reform, Leslie D. Gonzales and David F. Ayers find that community colleges “rely upon faculty members’ emotions to compensate for insufficient public investments” (455). What this means is that the emotional labor necessary to do the job well, engaging with individual and differently prepared students, falls upon the individual faculty

member. This disconnect—between what is demanded and expected and what is seen and rewarded—creates a sense of exhaustion and disappointment related to under-employment (Holter, et al.), for the two-year college faculty who largely carry an unfair workload, which is mostly not in their control to change.

Methods

This working paper presents the results of a mixed methods analysis of responses to a survey on the workload of two-year college faculty and the effects of workload on educator effectiveness. The survey included six demographic questions, 28 closed-ended items that asked respondents to select from a list of possible responses, and five open-ended items. The survey was distributed to TYCA members and other two-year college instructors during Fall 2019; 1,062 participants completed the survey. The TYCA Workload Task Force conducted a mixed-methods analysis of responses to the survey using descriptive statistics to analyze closed-ended responses. The Task Force also applied iterative thematic analyses of open-ended responses to survey questions using Dedoose (a web-based platform). The responses to one set of questions related to workload and teaching were then analyzed by a subset of the Task Force.

This working paper presents responses to the open-ended question, “What other comments would you like to make about your workload as it relates to teaching?” The responses were coded via a grounded-theory approach and then assessed holistically. The codes included burnout, class caps, compensation, policy, affect, service, status, teaching writing taking more time, and working conditions; 387 responses were reviewed and coded.

Report on Findings

Teaching for faculty at two-year colleges comprises the majority of their workload historically and traditionally, though increasingly other responsibilities and expectations, including service to the college and community, training and support for other faculty, administering programs and departments, has been impacting workload. Results to the question, “What other comments would you like to make about your workload as it relates to teaching?,” are presented below, gathered within perceived categories of responses that were identified by Task Force members, coded and then analyzed.

TWTMT: Teaching Writing Takes More Time

Respondents reported a perceived disconnect between the realities of teaching writing and the workload and compensation practices at their institutions as well as between the work of teaching writing versus teaching in other disciplines. We coded these as “Teaching Writing Takes More Time” (TWTMT). In general, many respondents reported what they perceived to be heavier workloads than faculty in other disciplines because teaching writing well is highly labor-intensive. They note that teaching writing well, according to both best practices and empirical research, requires engaging with each student individually, offering substantive feedback through successive drafts of papers, all maintained over the course of a semester. When class caps are high and/or the number of required sections is high; the result is an unfair labor situation.

One respondent wrote, “Each English course at my institution has a class enrollment cap of 30 students, and most composition-heavy courses require those 30 students to write at least 6,000 words of formal academic writing. That contributes to significant time in addition to planning and grading day-to-day classes and assignments.” Here, we can see the confluence of high class caps and the demands of teaching writing to create an untenable labor situation. Another respondent reported, “A 6/5 load is heavy when we feel a moral imperative to do the job well by

getting to know students, offering a lot of practice before major writing assignments, giving meaningful feedback, and providing opportunities for revision." Here, the respondent identified the individual student engagement necessary to teach writing well and its connection to a perceived professional standard. Over time, however, that need to do the job well may give way to the reality of a "crushing" (in the words of one respondent) workload: "This impacts our teaching in that we must lower our standards, grade quickly--not thoroughly--and process students through our courses as if they are [on] a conveyor belt." The result is a less-than-satisfactory learning experience for students. We can safely assume, given research on students most at risk and historically marginalized, that the students we most want to serve will suffer most.

A solution to this situation is offered by several respondents. First, workload for composition classes can be calculated differently due to their labor intensiveness. As one respondent reported, "Full-time English faculty teach 12 hours/semester, while other full-time faculty at the institution teach 15. We have fewer hours due to our grading load--our union has been very protective of this." In essence, teaching writing takes more time, so workload calculations account for this. A second alternative is to reduce class caps significantly, reducing the overall number of students a composition instructor works with per semester. One respondent recognized that a class cap of 18 in a composition class made the workload more bearable. However, it should be noted that these respondents were the great exception; from our analysis, workload compensation for teaching writing is a rare thing.

Policy: Shaping Teaching Conditions

Class caps and teaching loads: The respondents who reported working with large numbers of students report that two causal factors intersect: class caps and number of sections.

Many faculty reported that class caps far exceed the NCTE guidelines for teaching writing, with many colleges setting the cap for composition courses at 30. Others set the cap at 25–27 but then require faculty to teach more sections, usually 5-5 on the semester system. That equates to a large number of students—from 125 to 200—writing multiple papers each. Of the 387 coded responses to this open-ended question, 30 respondents specifically identified the course capacity for their first-year writing courses. Just 10% reported that their course caps for FYW fell below the recommended number of 20 (codified in the NCTE guidelines).

Course Cap	Percentage Reporting (n=)
30 or higher	20% (n=6)
26–29	17% (n=5)
24–25	42% (n=13)
21–23	10% (n=3)
20 or lower	10% (n=3)

Some respondents reported that their administrations misunderstand the labor associated with online instruction, particularly in decision-making levels beyond the program. One respondent wrote, "We have had a battle with course caps; some of our administrators think that online courses can and should be larger (I've had online writing-intensive classes of 33 students) without regard to best practices (NCTE's paper on it) or the fact that our f2f classes are capped at 22." Others have noted that online course offerings are increasing.

To echo another section of this and other papers, a policy solution would be to calculate composition courses differently in determining workload. One respondent wrote, "Grading papers is much more labor intensive than grading math tests and quizzes, so I've always felt English teachers at my institution should be carrying a 4/4 and not a 5/5. With 25 students per section that can be 125 students which is too much for giving quality feedback." Another respondent reported that a 12-credit load of writing courses at their college was calculated as equal to a 15-credit load of non-writing classes. Another respondent noted that a lower class cap for writing classes, 20–22, compensated for the higher workload associated with teaching writing classes.

Compensation: Policies that determine teaching load intersect with policies determining compensation and employment status. The working conditions and workload of contingent faculty was prevalent in the responses:

- "Everyone in the system knows the adjunct-labor system in higher education is unethical. The compensation does not match either the contributions made to workers' institutions nor the credentials and expertise of the workers, particularly in the combined lack of secure employment and benefits."
- "I work 80 hours a week at 3 different schools and I still can't afford rent."
- "I'm teaching more classes than tenure track instructors and receiving a fraction of the pay per unit of the course overall."
- "I teach 4 classes, which is full-time; but the college labels me part-time, so they don't have to offer any benefits--not even unemployment insurance."
- "Faculty have a long way to go before we are recognized/compensated/represented for the work that we do. To date, I've been reluctant to join the union at my two-year college (it's 4% of my wages), although I am a member of the union at my four-year university (where I make double the salary, have access to benefits, contracts, and regular pay increases that justify my union dues."

Contingent respondents addressed the compensation gap, but a large portion of full-time faculty also report poor compensation. They report salary increases that do not keep up with cost-of-living increases or even salary reductions that have not been restored. The consequences include full-time faculty regularly teaching overload sections to increase their income. In those few campuses where overload courses are not allowed, faculty reported they teach remotely or physically at other campuses. One respondent writes, "Our college has relatively low wages[,] compared to our neighboring two-year colleges[,] that do not meet the increases in the cost of living for our area. Many full-time faculty need to teach 7–8 sections in addition to meet[ing] our institutional obligations." Another corroborates this, reporting salary increases that were frozen: "Most FT faculty are taking working overload due to the minimal raises and lag time in effecting raises (we are hoping to receive retro-2018 and 2019 raises by the end of 2019). Many professors teach overloads by [teaching] courses at this college AND others. This Fall I teach 8 courses [. . .]." Another respondent reported that pay cuts in 2019 were followed by workload increases that fall.

A final factor complicates this situation even further. Several respondents reported that their colleges were experiencing hiring freezes, meaning there are fewer full-time/tenure-line faculty to conduct the kind of programmatic work that is critical to student success (wide-scale assessment, placement reform, curricular reform, etc.). One respondent writes, "With fewer full-time faculty, those of us left have felt increased pressure to keep up with the demands of assessment activities, program reviews, and maintenance of existing courses. We have been given additional responsibilities for ensuring ADA compliance, advising, and now dual credit partnerships, without additional compensation in terms of time or money."

Overall, inadequate compensation for contingent faculty, in terms of salary and benefits, leads to wide-spread dissatisfaction. Even among full-time faculty, compensation in many colleges is low-leading to faculty taking overloads, with an 8-8 course load not uncommon. Finally, with the reduction in the number of full-time faculty, an increase in workload for them has not been matched with an increase in compensation.

Affect:

Positive affect was rarely coded, but when it was, it was always in oppositional reference to a worse-case scenario. For example, one respondent said, "I am lucky to be at a place that considers 12 hours a full-time load for English faculty--as long as we are teaching at least two comp classes. (All other faculty teach a 15-hour load)". When negative affect was coded, respondents were most often expressing feelings of stress and depression and being "drained" by their workload, which they recognized as too high, plainly stating that a "5-5 load is exhausting and draining." Another respondent added to this, stating that the "heavy teaching load makes it almost impossible to be creative and innovative." The result is a highly "stressful" situation, according to many respondents, which, one added, "has caused many faculty to raise the issue of teaching load to administration over the years. Nothing, however, has been changed." It's clear from this that the emotional strain of a heavy and unmanageable workload has weighed on many faculty for years without relief.

Complicating the affective burden of a heavy workload is employment status. There was a repeated distinction between the workload of adjunct and full-time/tenure-line composition professors, citing inequitable pay and deplorable working expectations, with one respondent saying, "The employment situation for part-time faculty in higher education is a national disgrace." Contingent and full-time faculty cited low pay as the primary reason for taking on more sections of classes. We know from other research that financial vulnerability is a major cause of stress among American workers.

Overall, the affective response of respondents is highly negative, with frequent reporting of stress, anxiety, and depression leading to "low morale" and "burnout."

Conclusions and Implications

Responses to this open-ended question may not represent a true sampling of two-year college faculty. Only those who chose to take the time to write a response are represented. A very few reported positive working conditions, such as being "blessed" with low class caps or feeling "fortunate" to have their workloads adjusted for teaching writing classes. The majority of respondents reported that the emotional and personal costs of teaching English in a two-year college in the current conditions are great.

Those respondents who identified what were coded as "satisfactory working conditions" referenced some of the following characteristics of their workplace:

- "I have a great deal of autonomy and a course release (for writing assessment), so I feel very fortunate."
- "We have guidelines that are designed to help faculty such as: no more than 3 unique preps, four FYCs = load, etc."
- "Having taught at the high school level for many years, my workload at this institution, even when it appears like a great deal, remains much less stressful than I ever experienced at the high school level."
- "Five classes (our standard contract) is manageable for me, and I have the luxury of choosing whether or not to take overloads."
- "English instructors who teach composition courses get a composition pay differential."

- "Teaching three writing-intensive courses like English Composition give one class of "dispensation" each semester. We are also blessed with small class sizes (18)."
- "No one is forced [to] overload, and it is not necessarily encouraged. When faculty take these classes, it is typically for extra money. We are concerned as a department that if too many of [us] take these additional classes, admin will see this as a sign we can do more when in reality, teaching 15 credits per semester is already a lot of time and energy. Our Comp classes are capped at 20 and our developmental classes are capped at 15."
- "There is great flexibility about choice of texts, style of presentation, exams and papers, And optional group and individual mentoring for adjuncts by a designated full time person."

In other words, those respondents whose workloads were manageable had positions that had autonomy regarding taking overloads, had class caps that are consonant with recommendations by professional organizations, and had differentials or adjustments when teaching writing courses versus other kinds of courses.

These conditions are complicated by a constellation of other factors. Respondents reported that teaching writing requires attention to each student but that this is not recognized as a factor in determining workload. They report that offering feedback on hundreds of student drafts commonly spills into weekends and evenings, impinging on their family and personal lives (discussed further in TYCA Workload Working Papers #2 and #3). Further, contingent faculty reported that working conditions are demoralizing, citing lack of job security, administrative manipulations to avoid awarding benefits, and lack of respect (such as being assigned classes, or not, at the last second). A final complicating factor is the changing make-up of students, given reforms in placement and developmental education, sometimes or often imposed by administrators or legislatures without supporting faculty who need to revise course materials and training.

Overall, respondents painted a picture of unsustainable working conditions. Respondents who reported satisfaction suggest that this difficult culture may be corrected through adjusted workload calculations for composition courses and improved contingent faculty employment practices.

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For More Information

For more information about the TYCA workload project and additional reports, see <https://ncte.org/groups/tyca/tyca-position-statements/>.