



## **TYCA Working Paper #8: Making the Material Realities of Two-Year College English Labor Visible**

Two-Year College English Association

Workload Task Force

Date: November, 2020

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### **Abstract/Summary**

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 results of a qualitative analysis of the 596 responses to the open-ended question, "What aspects of the workload realities of two-year college English teachers are not sufficiently visible to others? Responses fall in three main areas: (1) employment and status conditions, (2) permeable work boundaries, and (3) contractual obligations. Overall, the material realities of working conditions in these areas are felt to be invisible to administration and the general public leading to the further deprofessionalization of two-year college English faculty.

### **Overview**

The "material realities" of everyday existence for the majority of two-year college English faculty teaching composition appears to the faculty to be invisible to the administration and certainly to the larger public. Overall, there's a sense that faculty know among themselves that the majority of teachers of composition are hanging on by a thread, trying to piece together a livable wage, often struggling to gain basic benefits (such as health insurance) while experiencing professional neglect and under-employment.

Included here are some details about the various aspects of the invisible material conditions: (1) employment and status conditions, (2) permeable work boundaries, and (3) contractual obligations. Included here are representative responses from the hundreds of responses gathered and a brief overview of the sentiment. The TYCA Workload Task Force acknowledges that a minority of two-year college English faculty have access to good salaries, benefits, and job security, but warns that such faculty, while more visible in the scholarship and in leadership roles, are not representative of the majority of faculty.

### **Literature Review**

The working conditions of two-year college English faculty specifically are under-examined, though best practices for course assignments, number of students, types of courses, and minimum pay rate are provided by national professional organizations. Though respondents to the TYCA Task Force Workload survey rarely mentioned specific financial aspects of their work,

the Modern Language Association states, "The minimum salary for full-time appointments at the entry level should be at least \$67,000 for those at the rank of instructor and at least \$75,000 for those at the rank of beginning assistant professor. Health care benefits and shared contributions to a portable retirement plan should also be provided" (Modern). Note that the MLA does not distinguish between full-time contractual and full-time tenure-track; many two-year college English faculty have full-time appointments or teach the equivalent of a full-time course load (see "Findings from the 2019 Survey"), and yet their compensation and benefits fall far short and lead to job dissatisfaction reported elsewhere (Eagan). For instructors on a course-by-course contract, the MLA calls for a "minimum compensation of \$11,100 for a standard 3-credit-hour semester course or \$7,400 for a standard 3-credit-hour quarter or trimester" (MLA). Other documents like "CCCC Statement on Working Conditions for Non-Tenure-Track Writing Faculty" call for a minimum pay rate per course, health insurance, retirement, and professional resources, while the NCTE Statement on the Status and Working Conditions of Contingent Faculty more generally advocates that "Faculty members serving in contingent positions should receive a salary that reflects their teaching duties and any duties outside the classroom they are asked to assume. Compensation, per course, for part-time faculty should never be lower than the per-course compensation for tenure-line faculty with comparable experience, duties, and credentials" (National Council of Teachers of English).

In addition to inadequate compensation, a heavy or excessive workload (often necessitated by inadequate compensation) takes a toll on one's sense of well-being and ability to balance work and life. Latz and Rediger put it bluntly: "In many ways, faculty work is never done." Haswell notes that "a good-faith writing class requires unusual amounts of teacher work because it requires individual attention to students and careful response to student writing." Haswell calculates a standard course and finds that with a three-course load, an instructor would already be working overtime, leaving no time for professional development or service, contrary to professional organizations' standards, such as the Rhetoric Society of America's "Statement Regarding Contingent Faculty." It should be noted that Haswell uses a course cap below the national average for his calculations ("Postsecondary").

Complicating the work-life balance is employment status. Holter, et al. refer to the common "demoralizing" effect of contingent faculty working conditions—lack of autonomy, professional respect—leading to becoming "resentful" and "disengaged from the profession" (246). This runs counter to the recommendations of the MLA's Committee on Contingent Labor in the Profession which calls for contingent faculty to be "should be incorporated into the life of the department" (Committee). For these and other reasons, the Indianapolis Resolution specifically calls for "explicit attention to the reality that material conditions are teaching and learning conditions." (Cox et al. 40). The TYCA Workload Task Force and this working paper seek to contribute to the response to that call.

## **Methods**

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. We also applied iterative thematic analyses of open-ended responses to survey questions using Dedoose (a web-based platform for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods research) to code each response. This working paper focuses on the material realities of working conditions, a major theme provided in response to the open-ended question, "What

aspects of the workload realities of two-year college English teachers are not sufficiently visible to others?"

The second most prevalent area of the workload visibility of two-year college writing teachers focused on material conditions of labor. Within this category, we drilled down to look at the most frequently co-occurring codes around grading feedback. We analyzed 596 participant responses. The code "Material conditions" was applied 298 times to 258 excerpts within the open-ended question responses, and sometimes occurred more than once within a specific response.

## **Report of Findings**

### ***Employment and Status Conditions***

Of the 134 participants responses that addressed material conditions, the coding and analysis coalesce in two related areas across employment categories (full-time/tenure-track [FT/TT] or contingent): financial and employment insecurity (especially for contingent faculty but also at times for FT/TT faculty), and de-professionalization, often experienced as being excluded from decision-making on issues directly impacting the respondents' working conditions.

Many faculty speak of struggling to find sufficient work to earn a basic, livable wage. This is especially true for contingent faculty, many of whom are forced to seek employment on multiple campuses, but it is also true for the many FT/TT faculty who work at institutions with very low salaries for which they are forced to compensate by taking overload courses at their own or another campus. Contingent faculty respondents report that compounding the effect of low wages is insecurity of employment: never knowing how many classes, if any, they will have from semester to semester and often with little or no say over which classes they will teach or their teaching schedule. This difficulty is compounded for those faculty who teach at multiple campuses. Some representative comments include:

- "The toll taken by the stress of job insecurity (lower pay, uncertainty for future assignments) and the demoralizing effect of not having a career/profession."
- "The stress of searching for secure work for adjuncts [takes its toll]."
- "The stress of taking on multiple jobs for adjuncts who cannot make enough to support themselves [is great]."
- "I work three jobs, so I have limited time [to work with students individually]."

Contingent faculty also report lack of access to health insurance and retirement benefits, as noted by the respondent who remarked "The stress of this work life impacts my health, yet I have no health care." During enrollment drops, such as we are experiencing/experienced in 2020, contingent faculty face even greater employment insecurity while FT/TT faculty face "Reduction in Force" (RIF) actions, wherein FT/TT faculty are laid off. As one respondent reported: "Our college is undergoing a 'reduction in force,' meaning we're firing faculty who have had implied tenure for years: people sobbing in the hallways, in constant fear of an opaque process that might leave us without jobs."

A second and related theme is the demoralization that comes from being devalued, most apparent in the low wages but also in the sense of being invisible when decision-making occurs, most commonly in course staffing but also when curricular changes are made by administrators or even legislatures, as these respondents observed:

- "It is hard to act like a professional crafting and developing your skills when you are just a throwaway employee pretending to be a professor."

- "The daily horror of realizing that the institution you work for not only doesn't appear to value the work you do, but also doesn't value learning as much as 'success.'"
- "Part-time faculty are invisible, and the institution likes it that way. This is demoralizing and a stark contrast to the care we are expected to offer students—often without compensation. I have no office in which to meet [students] to conference."

Both of these aspects of the material circumstances of two-year college English faculty workload stand in stark contrast to the discipline's and the individual institutions' push for greater engagement with students, improved student success, and more culturally responsive pedagogies, all of which explicitly or implicitly task faculty with more duties, such as counseling students (formally or informally), professional-development expectations, and consistent reaching out to struggling students.

### ***Permeable Work Boundaries***

Many respondents (59) reported that they find it extremely difficult to maintain healthy boundaries between work and home or personal life. They report that grading, assessment, student feedback, course preparation and the expectation of constant communication with students interferes with personal or family life. Especially, they note that responding to student writing and preparing multiple classes requires extensive time that often falls to late nights and weekends. Instructors report that the impacts of these stressors—including social, physical, and mental well-being as well as morale—are largely invisible aspects of their workload. Responses within this category emphasized the way that two-year college English teachers' workload seeps into weekends and evenings, and that the home/work distinction is challenging to maintain. The phrase "weekends and evenings" appeared regularly within responses, and comments like "I often do most of my grading and planning on the weekends and weeknights between soccer games and mealtimes with my own kids," and "Grading, reading, writing, and working from home on the weekends, especially if you are teaching any class with an online component" were representative.

The permeability between "work done at work" versus work done at home was one relevant sub-theme among this set of comments, but the nature of the work itself was also relevant here. As one respondent put it, "It feels like I could be giving feedback and inputting grades every minute of the day. I have almost no uninterrupted time to work. What I'm doing now is not sustainable and I keep trying new strategies to help"; this is echoed by a second, "I am never off work. Because the expectations for work are so extensive, I can never relax—even at night or on the weekends—because I have so much grading, planning, correspondence, research, writing, etc. to complete." Few of the responses that fell in this code could be characterized as a dislike of the work itself of teaching or responding to writing; however the scope of the work, its inability to be done during a typical work week, and a lack of uninterrupted time to do that work were the most prevalent sentiments, further illustrated by these comments:

- "If you teach 15 hours per semester, that means you are in the classroom much of the day, which leaves grading, course management, and email time for nights and weekends. The ways in which this is invasive to family life or any sort of work life balance is not visible."
- "Attending meetings, attending professional development, and so on means that I live with constant stress, have little to no time to spend with my family, no longer take breaks in the evenings or on weekends, and average about three to four hours of sleep a night."
- "I have to decide if I want to have a personal life or be the best teacher I can be, and the decision causes me guilt and stress no matter which way I go. I am beginning to resent my job."

Responses indicate many instructors find it difficult to balance grading, assessment, feedback, and preparation with personal or family life. Workload, particularly grading and preparation, requires extensive time that often falls on late nights and weekends. Instructors felt considerable time spent off campus, expectations of constant communications from students, and impacts on personal life were all invisible aspects of their workload.

### ***Contractual Obligations***

In addition to the very common concern of a too-high teaching load, job insecurity with low wages, and a sense of deprofessionalization, many respondents (54 responses, 97 excerpts tagged) reported contractual obligations that increase the workload but are often invisible. These obligations fall into three categories: service, unequal distribution of administrative and service work, and professional development expectations.

Much of the service two-year college English faculty, primarily but not exclusively FT/TT, are contractually obligated to perform is often neither compensated for nor seen. For example, two-year college English faculty are required to learn about and implement ADA compliance, new technologies, curricular/pedagogical initiatives, and mandatory advising. This service work is on top of a high teaching load which often means that professional development and scholarship is impossible. One respondent describes this less-visible workload: "There's also a lot of time spent in addressing needed student accommodations (uncompensated and often without any training or support) and in making course materials accessible (also uncompensated). Mentorship, professional learning, time to collaborate (on curriculum, assessment, etc.) are other typical activities that take place outside of contracted hours that are generally not compensated." Advising, and the accompanying workload of helping students navigate the complexities of higher education bureaucracies and keeping students on track academically, is captured in this respondent's comments: "At our institution, advising demands: we've shifted almost every [student] to faculty advisors, and I certainly have a full load of advisees. We're expected to keep in contact with them, expected to keep in contact with their instructors should their performance be unsatisfactory, and expected to herd them all in for advising when the time comes."

Many faculty also report that service and administrative work that is necessary for student success is neither evenly distributed among faculty nor is it contractually accounted for, such as placement reforms, dual enrollment coordination, and assessment requirements. This situation is exacerbated by some faculty not fulfilling their contractual obligations leaving other faculty to do more, a theme discussed further in Working Paper #4, but captured in this respondent's question: "How much work those of us who actually DO service work have to pick up to cover the contractually required service work of colleagues who ignore this requirement? There are no consequences for those who do not do the required work, so it often falls to just a few to do a lot (too much)."

Likewise, many faculty report that their contractual obligations do not acknowledge how important professional development and currency in the field are to maintaining quality writing instruction and effective writing programs, where the professional development instructors undertake to ensure the quality and currency of their work, is not a recognized component of their professional workload: "In my institution where professional development is not required, it often feels like it is not recognized by my colleagues or administrators that professional development is VITAL to effective instruction...so I guess what is not sufficiently visible is the work that I do—outside of contractual obligations—to make sure that I am doing good work."

The result of these factors is a sense of an overall disconnect between administrative views of faculty—seen as service workers, replaceable teachers--and the sense of professionalism the discipline promotes and that faculty expect of themselves in serving students. This disconnect is further complicated by faculty's awareness that vulnerable, often historically marginalized students are not being served as well as they could in contrast to their institutions' stated missions.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Responses about the invisibility of working conditions coalesce around a few major themes: (1) job insecurity and low wages leads to constant stress, (2) an excessive workload negatively impacts personal and family lives, leading to resentment of the work, and (3) unequal, uncompensated, and usually unacknowledged necessary work outside of contracted work falls on some faculty more heavily than others, leading to a sense of being conflicted: knowing what has to happen to serve students well and knowing that one's efforts to serve the students is neither rewarded nor seen. Overall, the material realities of working conditions in these areas are felt to be invisible to administration and the general public leading to the further deprofessionalization of two-year college English faculty.

### **Works Cited and Further Reading**

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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/>.