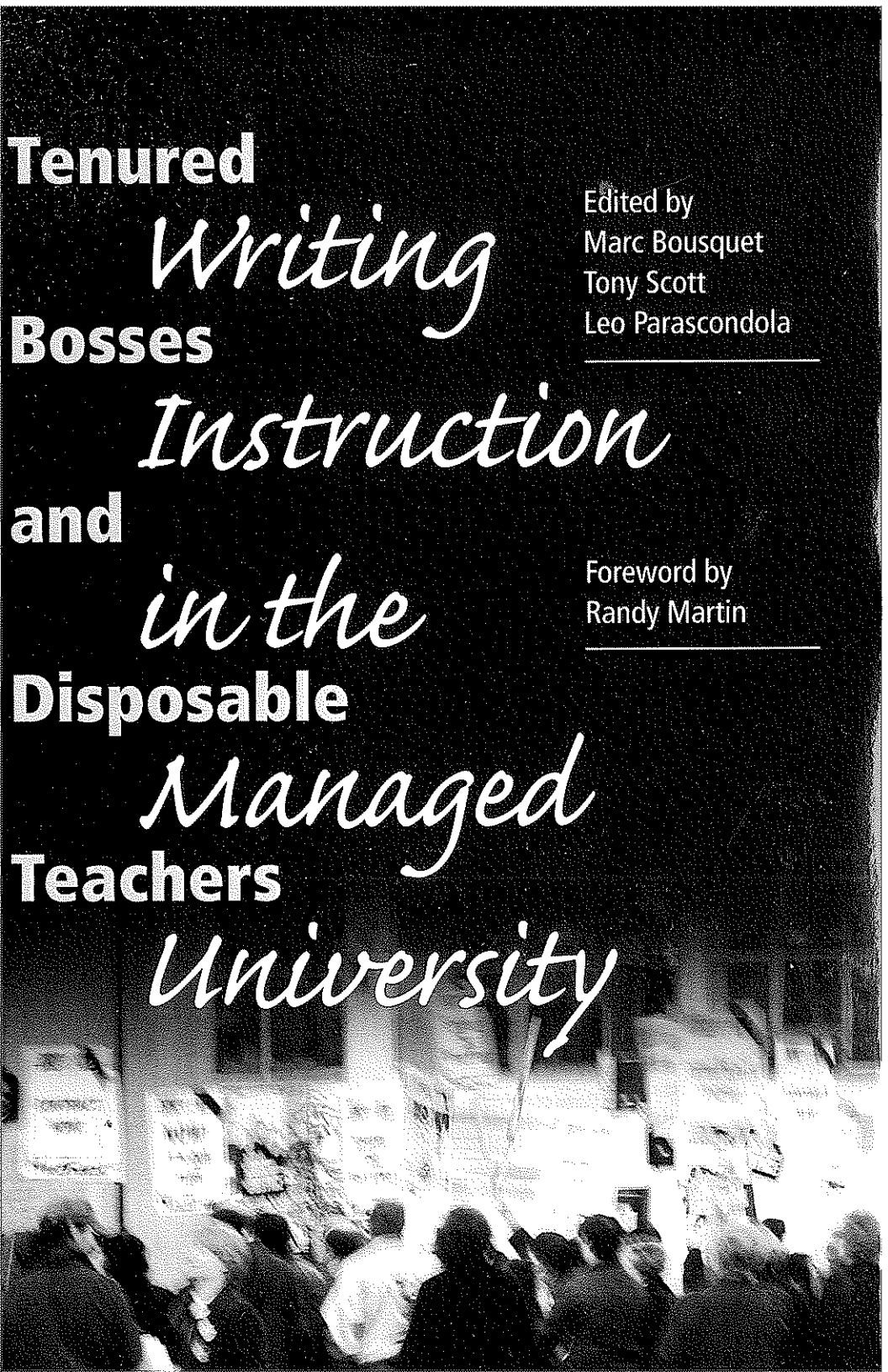
Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers

Writing Instruction in the Managed University

Edited by
Marc Bousquet
Tony Scott
Leo Parascondola

Foreword by
Randy Martin



Introduction: Does a "Good Job Market in Composition" Help Composition Labor?

Marc Bousquet

As a new assistant professor in late 1998, I was asked to give a talk on job-hunting to advanced graduate students at the University of Louisville, which offers a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition (and not in literature). In my experience of other English departments, little is expected of these talks on the job search besides a few cautionary remarks about "how tough it is out there" and shopworn advice (wear conservative outfits, don't send creative-writing samples to a critical job, etc.) Even so, most of the junior faculty I know have been made uncomfortable by these performances, in part because we know that what job candidates in most fields face is the likelihood of years of disappointment, even for the fortunate ones who eventually find tenure-track jobs. Taking all academic fields together, doctoral degrees are awarded around age thirty-three, but the average age of those winning tenure-stream jobs is thirty-nine. This means that even those who *do* manage to find tenure-stream work must find a way to endure an average of nearly six years of rejection, term lectureships, and crushing debt; "beginning" a career so late means subjecting yourself to tenure review at age forty-five or later, a time when persons in many other lines of public-service work (schoolteachers, police officers, military personnel, civil servants) are able to consider retirement. In many fields, the majority of persons entering graduate school leave without taking a doctorate: Most are compelled to ask themselves the rational question, "Am I willing to gamble my future and the happiness of my partner and/or children on a labor system arranged on such exploitative terms?" Even more startling is the realization that those who get to the position of tenure review in their forties are at the fortunate pinnacle of the academic labor system. Since the late 1960s, as a means of cutting costs and consolidating control, campus management has continuously substituted the labor of students and other casually employed persons for professorial faculty. At the present time, tenure-stream faculty perform as little

as 25 percent of all campus teaching, with the rest performed by a vast corps of flex-time and nontenurable teachers, most of them under direct administrative control, generally without the pay, support, research commitments, classroom autonomy, and academic freedoms enjoyed by traditional faculty.

The talk that I prepared covered some of this ground. I also observed that the pervasive substitution of student and other flex labor for faculty labor has a meaning that the profession has yet to fully absorb: *For many graduate students, the receipt of the Ph.D. is the end and not the beginning of a long teaching career.* Contrary to the Fordist analysis predominating in academic professional associations, which imagine that the holder of the Ph.D. is the "product" of a graduate school, we now have to recognize that in many circumstances the degree holder is really the "waste product" of a labor system that primarily makes use of graduate schools to maintain a pool of cheap workers. The product of graduate education is the cheap and traditionally docile graduate-student worker, not the holder of the Ph.D.—hence the passion for developing "alternate careers" for Ph.D.s, which dispose of the degree-holding by-product while making room for new cheap graduate employee workers (Bousquet, "Waste Product").

A few minutes into the talk, one of my colleagues interrupted. "But you know, don't you, that all of *our* graduate students expect to get jobs?"

There was a chorus of assent from the graduate students. It turned out that persons awarded doctorates from the English department at the University of Louisville enjoyed what was effectively a 100 percent success rate in finding tenure-stream academic jobs, many of them at doctorate-granting institutions.

Reacting to my obvious astonishment, another member of the faculty said, "I think the employment prospects are different for rhetoric and composition than for other fields in English."

If anything, this was an understatement. Graduate students in the department commonly receive a dozen (or even two dozen) invitations to interview for rhet-comp jobs at MLA; several students here have turned down more interviews than many grad students in literature or cultural studies will ever receive. While of course I had been informed of the programmatic separation in English graduate study between the two largest public universities in the state, so that the University of Kentucky was constrained to award only the Ph.D. in literature, and—by the same act of the legislature—U of L's graduate English faculty permitted to award only the Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition, I had otherwise thought little about it.

So much for my talk. For the rest of the session, I listened, and it became clear to me what my colleagues and these students already knew—there was something different about the field of rhetoric and composition.

Over the next several months, some of the critically oriented graduate students (including coeditor Tony Scott, now employed at University of North Carolina–Charlotte) drew me into an investigation of this difference. Was rhet-comp simply becoming popular? Could the popularity of the field be understood as a

"market fluctuation," in the same sense that perhaps next year Anglo-Saxon would be "in demand"? Or was there a structural and historical relationship between the employability of rhet-comp Ph.D.s and the labor system? The answers are numerous, intertwined, and contradictory. There does appear to be a renewal of interest in writing instruction, for example, accompanied by a lessened credibility for literature as the primary work of an English department (perhaps in connection with the waning need for the nation-state to legitimate itself through literary studies, observed by Bill Readings and others). Furthermore, there is a great deal of variety in the kind of opportunities available to persons with rhet-comp degrees, corresponding in part to the nature of their graduate study and other factors. Much of the renewed interest in writing instruction as a matter of curricular focus can be attributed to a more general turn in the academic-industrial complex toward vocationalism, job training, and skills-based outcomes; nonetheless, other aspects, such as the increased efforts devoted to critical literacies, owe a great deal to the continuation of social-movement commitment to the expansion of civil democracy.

However, the element of the larger pattern that interested us most was the question of structure: Is there any systematic relationship between the relative ease with which rhet-comp Ph.D.s earn tenure-stream jobs and the way in which the same labor system uses graduate students in other fields in English as disposable workers—persons whose teaching careers are commonly finished with the award of the doctorate?

A great deal of research remains to be done in this area. For ourselves, together with many other critical scholars observing the field such as Eileen E. Schell, Bruce Horner, Donna Strickland, and David Downing, the difference between rhet-comp and the other fields of English has much to do with its specific positioning in the disciplinary division of labor. Perhaps the key point is that persons holding the rhet-comp Ph.D. will frequently expect to serve the managed university *as management.* There is enormous variety in the way that rhet-comp scholars are employed, but as one of the field's leading young thinkers on the question of administering the university writes, "most" rhet-comp Ph.D.s will be "required" during some portion of their career to manage a writing program, "oversee the labor of others" and perform "other such managerial tasks" (Richard E. Miller, "Let's" 98–99). In this context, the others whose labor is overseen by the holder of the rhet-comp Ph.D. are commonly persons who have experience of graduate study in the other fields of English—current or former graduate students working as flexible labor, rather than as colleagues.

This is hardly a circumstance in which holders of rhet-comp doctorates are alone. The managerial functions of the full-time faculty have grown so pervasive as to present substantial legal obstacles to organizing the professoriate, especially on private campuses. And as Clyde Barrow, Harry Braverman, and Evan Watkins have been at pains to demonstrate, the conventional academic disciplines as a group, including English, have demonstrated a pronounced tendency over

the past century to show compatibility with management theory and practice or even at times to serve as a branch of management science altogether. Nonetheless, the administrative character is indeed more pronounced in rhet-comp, so that professional compositionists as a group tend to be interpellated as lower management: That is, even those holders of rhet-comp doctorates who evade the "requirement" to serve directly as lower managers can be viewed as theorizing and/or providing legitimation (through the production of scholarship, inventing classroom praxis, etc.) in connection with what Marx called "the work of supervision."

Rhetoric and composition appears to exemplify the sad ideal of labor relations in the managed university. As little as 7 percent of the teaching is done by tenure-stream faculty. In rhet-comp, traditional faculty working conditions are enjoyed primarily by managers, not by teachers. This is a discipline in which administrators can consistently expect academic freedom, a professional wage, pleasant working conditions, job security, and participation in campus governance. By contrast, writing *teachers* are commonly paid less than seventeen thousand dollars a year for a 4-4 load, frequently denied such basic classroom autonomies as choosing their texts, assignments, and pedagogies (hence the good food served up by publishers to rhet-comp managers at CCCC), often fired without cause, rarely enjoy health insurance, and are "generously" relieved of service obligations by managers who acknowledge that their workers are "paid too poorly to spend the time on campus participating in governance." Although rhet-comp's official discourse acknowledges that these professorial freedoms and protections are desirable for writing teachers (or at least that many writing teachers desire them, which isn't quite the same thing), the "professionalization" of the field has gained them only for management.

As I note in my contribution to this book, nearly every participant in the composition conversation would like to see writing instructors become more like faculty—to have the chance to govern, participate more fully in the intellectual community, develop as an instructor, enjoy better pay, benefits, protections, and security. However, this hasn't translated into a consensus among professional and managerial compositionists that writing instructors should actually *be* faculty. Why not? Isn't composition work faculty work? Or is composition's faculty work essentially managerial work, or the supervision of parafaculty?

If rhet-comp is the canary in the mine for the academy more generally, what it tells us is that the professorial jobs of the future are jobs for an increasingly managerial faculty. Getting tenure will more and more nakedly mean: being a manager. From the perspective of the already vast majority of university teachers ineligible for tenure, it is obvious that the security and benefits of the "fortunate" managerial minority are predicated on the insecurity and exploitation of the teaching majority. However, anyone who has read the discourse of writing program administrators is unlikely to be persuaded that this fortunate group of people has found in their managerial positions the kind of satisfactions they hoped from academic work. Indeed, one of the more widespread structures of feeling

among WPAs is the desire to be released from their managerial service into the general population of tenure-stream faculty.

What all this suggests is that *academic managerialism is a relation between the managed and the managers that ensures the unhappiness of both groups.* Although the discontent of the managed and the managers takes different forms, many of the contributors to this volume will argue that *both forms of unhappiness can be measured by their distance from the same benchmark: traditional faculty work.* That is to say, both managers and the managed would be happier as members of the professoriate, colleagues rather than "bosses" and subordinates. This doesn't mean that all persons teaching as adjunct lecturers want or need to change their job descriptions (and for example start to do research): far from it. As in the two-year colleges and most liberal arts institutions, teaching without an extensive research profile is a traditional function of the tenured professoriate in nearly all academic fields. Nor do we have to suggest that all adjuncts have to work full time to join the professoriate as colleagues: There is precedent for pro rata pay (and even tenure) for those genuinely preferring to work on a part-time basis. Similarly, writing programs founded on collegial structures will generally require administration, but as Bill Hendricks points out in his contribution to this volume, at his unionized campus the writing program administrator is the executor of policies created by her colleagues, all of whom are tenurable faculty.

The WPA as the convenor of a group of colleagues who teach writing is a very different experience for all concerned than the gross managerial relation now taken for granted in thinking about writing programs. The disciplinarization of composition, marked by a great blossoming and new vitality in rhet-comp scholarship, has been accompanied by the near-total conversion of composition work to a system of flexible managed labor—so that, *despite a great increase in rhet-comp Ph.D.s, a college writing student is increasingly likely to be taught by someone who does not hold a doctorate and whose working conditions are radically different from those of traditional faculty.* Though composition has commonly professed a politically committed orientation, many of the people who do composition scholarship find that they are being asked to supervise, theorize, and legitimate the steady degradation of the scene of college writing.

This collection explores the nature, extent, and economics of the managed-labor problem in composition, where as much as 93 percent of all sections are taught by graduate students and other "disposable" teachers. Bringing together a diversity of perspectives in the academic labor and left-composition conversations, ranging from pragmatism to historical materialism, the contributors ask tough questions regarding the relationship of workplace practices in higher education to the service economy more generally, the consequences of managerialism for the politics of rhet-comp scholarship, and the effect of corporatization on the nature of the literacy disseminated in composition classrooms.

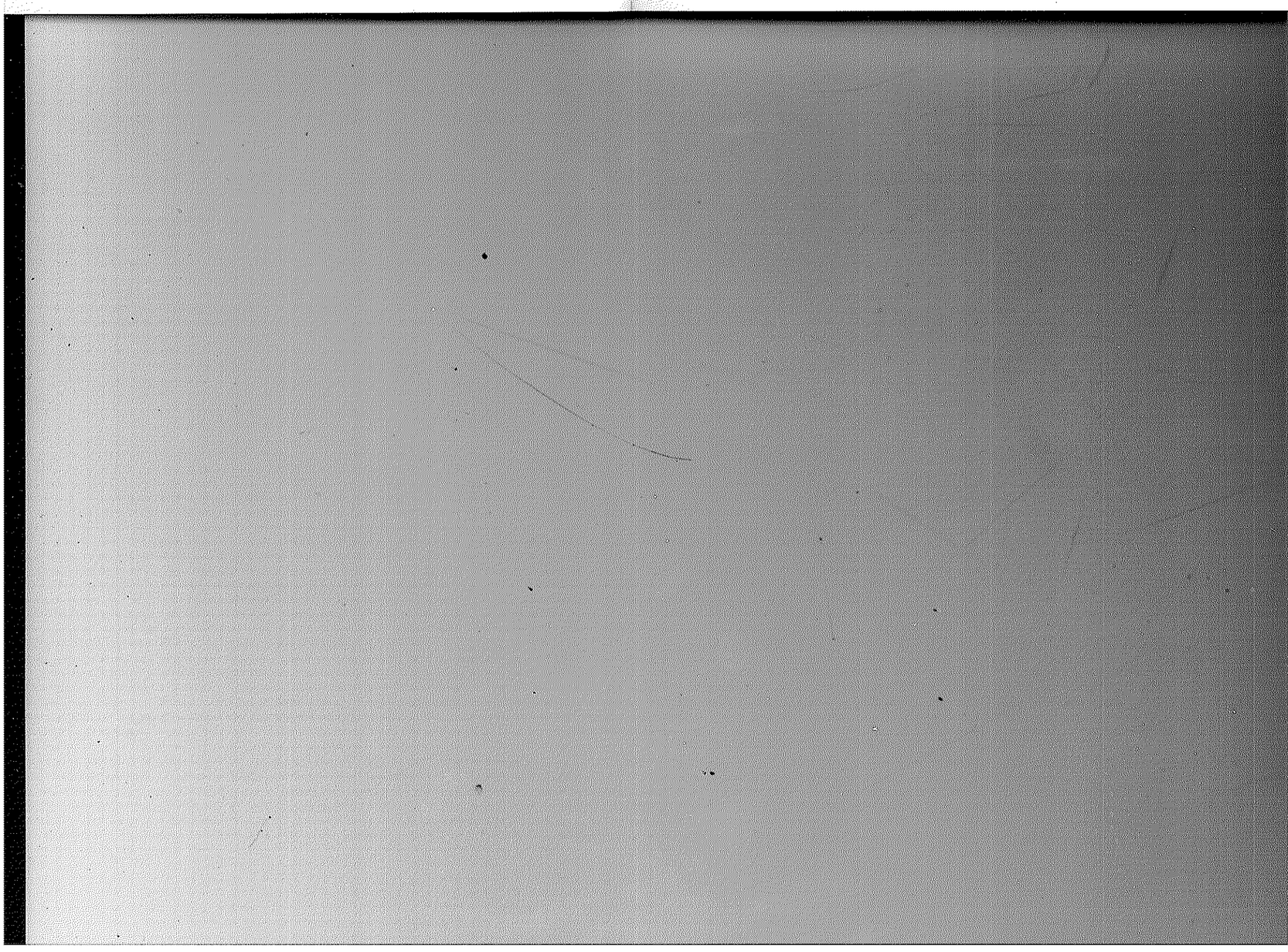
In the first section, "Disciplinarity and Capitalist Ideology," Richard Ohmann explores the degree to which increased managerialism in composition leads to

sharpening inequalities of education, opportunity, wealth, and power between groups of students and citizens. Seeking a transformative role for the composition intellectual, Donna Strickland in "The Managerial Unconscious of Composition Studies" observes that the composition discourse has elided distinctions in the material situations of composition professionals and writing teachers, with the consequence of obscuring the intrinsic historical relation between the "rise of composition" and the rise of the managed-labor paradigm in the corporate university. David Downing provides a trenchant critique of the origins in Taylorist industrial management of what he describes as a "managed disciplinarity" in English studies, subjecting teachers and writers to the imperatives of global capitalism. Paul Lauter, in "From Adelphi to Enron—and Back," studies the relationship between market ideology and managerial domination of the workplace in a variety of institutional contexts, often with drastic consequences for the public served. My own effort, "Composition as Management Science," questions the advisability of the "pragmatist turn" in rhet-comp scholarship, observing that corporate rhetoric and practices are less likely to lead to democratic outcomes than democratic procedures, workplace solidarity, and a rhetoric of transformation.

The second section, "Putting Labor First," explores the consequences and possibilities of putting the intellect, commitments, and interests of those who labor at the teaching of composition ahead of those who manage the teaching of composition. In the lead contribution, Bill Hendricks's important discussion of composition and academic unions observes that although more than 40 percent of all full-time faculty (nearly two-thirds at public institutions) are unionized, unionism has appeared tangentially, if at all, in many of the most prominent discussions of composition work; the essay goes on to enumerate several important ways that unions have empirically improved the circumstances of teaching and learning in the composition classroom. In "Toward a New Labor Movement in Higher Education," Eileen Schell analyzes the way in which campus, municipal, statewide, and national organizing campaigns have worked in coalitions with revitalized academic unions to develop political and legislative initiatives in support of improved working conditions. Eric Marshall's "Teaching Writing in a Managed Environment" provides a compelling first-person narrative of the making of an academic unionist—from graduate student and adjunct writing instructor to professional organizer in some of the most significant university organizing campaigns of the moment. Steven Parks examines the ways that writing programs can bring students to greater consciousness of themselves as workers in solidarity with other workers, in the university and beyond. Writing through the lens of one composition instructor who works as a supermarket cashier to supplement her teaching income, William H. Thelin and Leann Bertoncini explore the challenges that adjunct faculty face when trying to implement critical pedagogy. Completing the section, Ruth Kiefson explains the processes of adjunct exploitation under academic capitalism within the larger framework of market society and an unfolding general crisis for working people in all walks of life.

Coeditor Tony Scott leads off the next section, devoted to the critique of managerialism, with a study of the way that the managerial reality and liberatory ambitions of professional compositionists can lead to contradictory literacies and a fractured disciplinarity identity, one that advocates reflexive practice everywhere but in the basement offices of its own practitioners. Bill Vaughn's "I Was an Adjunct Administrator" pursues the material ironies consequent upon the degree to which downsizing, outsourcing, and perma-temping pervades composition—to the point where even managers are becoming part-timers. Amanda Godley and Jennifer Seibel Trainor provide a fascinating sequel to the authors' "After Wyoming" study of the rhetorics of labor and student need used by well-meaning managerial faculty in their efforts to affect the labor relations in basic-writing programs at two California campuses, ultimately expressing reservations about the usefulness of corporate rhetoric in improving working conditions. With his piece on "bureaucratic essentialism," Chris Carter suggests that the corporate-bureaucratic structure of composition programs increasingly leads teachers and writers to find the university as a space to practice rather than critique capitalism. Katherine Wills explores the causes and consequences of a labor system in which many workers are expected to accept non-wage compensation (such as "psychic income") for their effort. Walter Jacobsohn examines the contingent status of most composition workers in the context of recent critiques of liberatory pedagogy, focusing on the contradictory ambitions of liberation and the inability of the academy to practice justice for its own workforce.

In the final section, "Pedagogy and Possibilities," contributors explore a range of alternative practices and rhetorics based in everyday circumstances of teaching, program design, and professional or disciplinary self-understanding, many of which are intended to be deployed in alliance with the unionism and ensemble activism discussed in section two. Coeditor Leo Parascondola opens the section with "'Write-to-Earn': College Writing and Management Discourse," questioning the intersection of managerial logic with the rhetoric of "writing to learn" in critical and progressive pedagogies, with the consequence of converting liberatory goals to the reduced horizon of job-readiness or "writing to earn." Ray Watkins studies the ways in which the faculty associated with literary and business English can collaborate in writing programs, serving students more effectively while improving the solidarity and self-organization of the academic workforce. Examining some of the values often taken for granted in writing instruction, Robin Truth Goodman studies how some superficially transparent ambitions such as individuality and self-expression can be harnessed to consumerism, anti-solidarity, and the continuing marginalization of the oppressed. Christopher Ferry cautions against the abandonment of liberatory pedagogy, especially in light of the special risk that composition runs of having its aims appropriated by the corporate forces ascendant at many institutions. Donald Lazere discusses the ways in which the political semantics of critical theory and culture studies affect the possibility (and wisdom) of writing teachers appearing neutral about labor issues in their classrooms.



The author of *Managed Professionals: Unionized Faculty and Restructuring Academic Labor,* Gary Rhoades provides an afterword that observes the multiple frames in which the "managed professionals" who do teaching work see themselves and must correspondingly organize themselves: as educators, workers, professionals, critics, and scholars.

Particular thanks are due to coeditor Tony Scott for suggesting that *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* (www.workplace-gsc.com) prepare a special topic cluster devoted to labor issues in writing programs and to Tony Baker and Leo Parascondola, as well as the entire *Workplace* collective, for collaborating in the realization of that vision. Early versions of five essays appearing in this revised and much-expanded volume appeared in that topic cluster. Also available at the *Workplace* Web site (go to the main page and click on *back issues*) are interviews and colloquies on writing programs and academic labor featuring Ira Shor, Patty Harkin, James J. Sosnoski, Michael Murphy, Cary Nelson, Sharon Crowley, and many others.

Part One

Disciplinarity and Capitalist Ideology