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for Post-Secondary Teachers of Writing

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Opinion

The Wyoming Conference Resolution Opposing Unfair Salaries and Working Conditions for Post-Secondary Teachers of Writing

Members who attend this year's Conference on College Communication and Composition will have an opportunity to vote on the Wyoming Conference Resolution, which has been proposed by participants attending the Wyoming Conference on English this June. The resolution calls upon the Executive Committee to establish grievance procedures for post-secondary writing teachers seeking to redress unfair working conditions and salaries. The resolution reflects a remarkable and spontaneous consensus that emerged during this year's conference. Participants felt it should be called the Wyoming Conference Resolution to indicate the co-operation and conviction that gave rise to it. Tilly Warnock, the conference director, readily agreed.

So remarkable was the spirit of the Wyoming Conference that this discussion would be incomplete without some effort to describe how the resolution arose. The conference began on a Monday and ended Friday afternoon. The topic this year was "Language and the Social Context." By mid-week, many of us had become persuaded that we ought to consider how the topic applied to our own profession: "What is the social context for writing teachers?" Some stark polarities gave rise to this question. James Moffett, one of the major consultants to the conference, spoke of his conviction that teachers of writing ought to enable students to discover the freedom of self-expression. Some of us were struck with the irony that those of us charged with this significant responsibility often feel unable to speak freely about the fundamentally unfair conditions under which we labor.

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From the stories we tell one another, it is clear that many of us regard ourselves as victimized by our institutions, relegated to marginal positions and tenuous employment with no benefits. Conference participants told of the repression and exploitation they experienced at their home institutions. Graduate students told of feeling coerced to teach courses without pay; teachers at community colleges told of heavy, unreasonable course loads; part-time and adjunct instructors at major private and public universities told of the demeaning status and inequitable salaries they were forced to accept as conditions of employment; full-time faculty members with a primary commitment to teaching writing told of unfair tenure review proceedings; and literature faculty members who are sometimes called upon to teach writing expressed their unease at the inequitable treatment handed out to their part-time or full-time and adjunct colleagues in composition.

Those stories were told over breakfast in the dining hall, during coffee-breaks between sessions, and in late-night talks after the honky-tonk bands playing at Laramie's night spots had finished the last set. We hear such stories whenever teachers of writing gather. But there was a harder edge to them at Laramie, a greater insistence in the telling, a deeper silence in the listening. Perhaps this was because of the natural intimacy that comes when 200 people meet for a week, live together in dorms, and eat together in the cafeteria, while surrounded by a spectacular and harmonious natural world, one which needs neither social context nor language to endure. Certainly the greater intensity of our concern was due in part to the way James Slevin chose to address the conference topic. He hammered home to us just how endemic are the local conditions we described.

Reporting on studies conducted by the Association of Departments of English (ADE), Slevin told us that only forty percent of new English PhDs now find tenure-track positions. We have been told this disheartening reality is the result of economic forces beyond the control of English departments. Plaintive cries against economic hardships were first uttered twelve to fifteen years ago amid predictions that enrollments in the late 1970s and early 1980s would plummet. Contrary to these predictions, enrollments in colleges and universities increased by twenty to thirty percent between 1974 and 1984. About one-third of the English departments recently surveyed by ADE report growth in the undergraduate literature major, while one-fourth to one-third of the graduate programs report growth. Of those institutions offering undergraduate technical communication programs, eighty percent report growth. Three-fourths of those schools offering graduate degrees in rhetoric report growth in their programs. But despite the reasonable health of literature programs and the robust health of rhetoric and technical communications programs, English departments are the departments most likely to employ part-time faculty members, and they almost always hire them to teach writing.

Slevin's talk clarified how disenfranchised are teachers of writing. It also suggested to some of us that there are larger issues of academic freedom inherent in hiring policies which rely heavily on part-time or temporary positions. Since sixty percent of new PhDs in English cannot find full-time, tenure-track employment, many of them must accept part-time or temporary full-time employment if

they wish to participate in academic life at all. And since the salaries offered for such positions are usually low, they are often filled by women; that is, by those who constitute an underclass in the economy generally. Indeed, the decline in the number of full-time, secure positions and the increase in part-time or temporary full-time positions in higher education reflect national employment trends. There has been a decline in the number of full-time jobs typically held by women, and an increase in part-time positions, a strategy that allows employers to save money on benefits while at the same time meeting their traditional labor needs.

Slevin heightened our awareness of the polarity between the freedom we are asked to promote in the classroom and the threats to academic freedom and absence of job security faced by many teachers of writing. He also heightened our awareness of the polarity that divided the privileged from the underprivileged in English departments. Many participants expressed bitterness and frustration that their demeaning status is visited upon them, or at least abetted, by their tenured colleagues. At many of our colleges and universities—even those enjoying great prestige—teachers of writing hold the same degrees as their tenured counterparts; yet they are excluded from participating in academic life, prohibited from teaching courses in their fields of academic preparation, denied the traditional support for research, and denied even basic benefits. Sometimes their numbers exceed those of the tenured faculty in English. They often carry heavier teaching loads even though they are designated as “part-time” faculty. Most demoralizing is the lack of respect accorded those who teach writing. Composition is regarded as something “anyone can do,” as one professor said when he read a copy of the resolution circulated in his department after the conference.

The bitterness toward tenured English faculty surprised some of those attending the conference who enjoy this privileged status. English professors are unused to thinking of themselves as privileged in any sense. Some genuinely believed that such conditions were not prevalent, or at least did not prevail at their home institutions. Motivated by the concerns raised at the conference, some of them have since made inquiries and have found that indeed composition teachers at their colleges or universities are exploited, denied privileges, and, in one case, are earning less than those employed by the physical plant. Others honestly expressed their fear that if the conditions for teachers of writing were improved, tenured faculty members would have to carry a heavier burden in teaching composition.

With these realizations, we met the enemy, and discovered they are us.

This polarity—and the bitterness it inspired—threatened to pull the conference apart. Fortunately, James Sledd’s talk galvanized us. He spoke on the global issues of language instruction in the context of class power and exploitation. As part of this larger concern, he chastened teachers of writing by pointing out that we condemned the unfair and exploitative attitudes that have resulted from the creation of a privileged and protected class, while at the same time we sought that same status ourselves. He chastened English faculty with the remark that, if we sought evidence to disprove the notion that the study of the humanities promoted more humane conduct, we need look no further than the way we

treated graduate students and part-time faculty in our own departments. During the question and answer session, many of us sought to avoid the issues Sledd raised by asking safe “academic” questions of the other panelists. Then suddenly the top blew off. A graduate student rose to speak. So conditioned was she to keeping silent that her voice broke as she spoke; so frustrated was she by the conditions she had felt compelled to endure in order to seek a degree in English that she wept. She challenged our silence and apathy; she asked us why we had not spoken to the issues Sledd charged us with addressing.

It probably is not possible to convey the galvanizing effect her challenge had on those who heard her. After this session, an unusually large number of participants came to the room set aside for writing comments on each day’s sessions, comments that are then published the following day. One of the responses to this session is representative of the general reaction:

Well, I’ll say the obvious—it’s about time someone stood up and did what the last speaker of the session did. There’s nothing wrong with talking about what have been called “local” concerns. But the fear—perhaps the fear that “there’s nothing to be done”—about trying to deal with the global issues needs to be brought into the open and dealt with. We listen to someone like Sledd. We laugh at his wonderful humor. We nod our heads as he talks about the state of education within the context of our world. We give him the biggest round of applause of the evening. Then, damn it, we run as fast as we can from what he’s saying, and we do it by almost ignoring it. We don’t want to face *our own roles* in the problem, and how we—as people, as teachers, as “professionals”—are implicated in the very problems we’re trying to solve. Perhaps there is no solution. Perhaps nothing we do as individuals, or even as a group, can do anything to mitigate the frightening direction that some of us see us going. But to ignore it—no. Not if we take ourselves seriously when we speak so glibly about making things better.

Another kind of response was made later that evening when two conference participants met, not really by chance. One of them was male, a tenured faculty member at a state school, well-known in the profession, who had been maintaining during the conference that the predatory conditions described by many participants were not necessarily reflective of the profession as a whole. The other was female, untenured, changing jobs, and certainly not at the top of the professional hierarchy. She had been arguing throughout the conference that the unfair conditions were so endemic to the profession that the professional organizations ought to take action to correct them. Following the emotion-charged session, he guided her to a quiet spot and asked, Luther-like, “Are you really ready to lead the revolution?” She said, Erasmus-like, “It is not a revolution we need. It is a resolution of conflict within the existing structures.” From this colloquy, there emerged a mutual sense of what action we might take, and the foundation was laid for the Wyoming Conference Resolution.

The results of the late-night conversation were circulated the next day as a draft resolution, and conference participants were invited to discuss it later that afternoon. They filled the dormitory lounge to overflowing. James Sledd sat quietly on the floor, perhaps contemplating what he had wrought. The two who offered to incorporate these suggestions in a final draft were seen collaborating

on it during a session on collaborative writing. A typed copy of the revised version was circulated at a reception later that evening and edited. The final version was presented as a petition at the final session Friday morning. More than enough signatures were gathered to enter it as a resolution at the CCCC this spring. Conference participants were nonetheless urged to carry the resolution to their home institutions and to seek more support.

We urge you to join us in the spirit of the Wyoming Conference Resolution. We do not offer it—nor was it proposed—as the only anodyne to our problems. But it does provide those who seek change one way to do so. The provisions of the resolution are:

WHEREAS, the salaries and working conditions of post-secondary teachers with primary responsibility for the teaching of writing are fundamentally unfair as judged by any reasonable professional standards (e.g., unfair in excessive teaching loads, unreasonably large class sizes, salary inequities, lack of benefits and professional status, and barriers to professional advancement) . . .

The wording of this provision is intended to indicate concern for all ranks in our profession: graduate teaching assistants, teachers at community colleges, part-time or temporary teachers in colleges and universities, and those on tenure-track lines whose work is often considered less worthy than that done by faculty members teaching literature or linguistics.

AND WHEREAS, as a consequence of these unreasonable working conditions, highly dedicated teachers are often frustrated in their desire to provide students the time and attention which students both deserve and need . . .

This provision is included to remind us that the unfair conditions under which teachers of writing labor have profound implications for educating the next generation. We are aware of the deep concern expressed by the public at large and their elected representatives about the apparent decline in students' ability to articulate their interests and hopes. This concern is one we share.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Executive Committee of College Composition and Communication be charged with the following:

The resolution is addressed to College Composition and Communication as the professional organization most immediately and exclusively concerned with the teaching of writing. Participants discussed the desirability of seeking further endorsement from other professional organizations—such as MLA, NCTE (as the umbrella organization for CCC), NEA, and others—after it was approved by CCC.

1. To formulate, after appropriate consultations with post-secondary teachers of writing, professional standards and expectations for salary levels and working conditions of post-secondary teachers of writing.

We felt it was important to provide those who have feared to speak on their own behalf an opportunity to do so. We also felt it would be pointless to try formulating professional standards without detailed information about working conditions and salaries at diverse institutions. We also hoped that one result of gathering such detailed information would be that the knowledge would inspire other proposals and initiatives for change.

The wording “working conditions of post-secondary teachers of writing” was carefully chosen, so that those full-time faculty members in English who teach composition only occasionally will feel included. The resolution as a whole is worded so that enlightened English faculty members, even those who never teach composition, can feel encouraged to participate in helping to alleviate the unfair conditions under which some of their colleagues labor.

2. To establish a procedure for hearing grievances brought by post-secondary teachers of writing—either singly or collectively—against apparent institutional non-compliance with these standards and expectations.

This provision is included as a way of empowering those who feel most disenfranchised. We wanted to avoid imposing Draconian solutions. This might result if our professional leadership attempted to provide generic solutions to unfair practices that vary widely from institution to institution. We were also impressed by the irony that those who teach self-expression to students feel themselves coerced into silence as a condition of employment. We felt the healthiest approach was for them to have an opportunity to demonstrate to themselves and their institutions that we can, through the language of petition and complaint, promote peaceful change. Finally, we recognized that some among us are content with their lot, and that, given this complacency, a professional organization seeking to impose change could make little headway. We felt that change can come only if those who wish it take action on their own behalf.

We also recognize that implementing formal grievance procedures will be costly. We assume that if members of CCC feel the procedure will benefit the profession as a whole, they will be ready to spend a bit more on dues.

3. To establish a procedure for acting upon a finding of non-compliance; specifically, to issue a letter of censure to an individual institution’s administration, Board of Regents or Trustees, State legislators (where pertinent), and to publicize the finding to the public-at-large, the educational community in general, and to our membership.

In proposing this provision, we were alert to the widespread attention given nationally to a perceived decline in communication skills among students. We felt it was timely to make common cause with those calling for reform. There are those who will argue that some institutions will not feel particularly threatened by the possibility of being criticized in public. This may be true, and speaks again to our sense that no single solution will resolve our problems. But certainly publicizing detrimental conditions of employment will not hinder the efforts of those who seek change at such an institution.

On the other hand, we are aware that many administrators will seek to avoid detrimental publicity because it might bring in its train inquiries from members of boards of trustees, or state governors, or state legislators.

We also hoped that by publicizing the unfair conditions we might discourage candidates from applying for positions at institutions found in non-compliance. Job candidates ought to know that, at a given institution, conditions have become so unbearable that faculty members have formally protested them to their

professional organization. It takes little genius to realize that unfair labor practices are often alleviated when the labor pool diminishes or evaporates.

We ask you to consider carefully whether it is not now time to seek ways of redressing the shabby and exploitative circumstances in which many of our colleagues find themselves. These conditions are unlikely to change, even though, as we read in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, many institutions are now preparing to hire "promising young scholars" to replace retiring faculty. Some may believe that this signals automatic change as we move into an era of labor shortage and seller's market. But the current shabby conditions for teachers of writing are not the product of economic conditions. They are the result of short-sighted policies formulated in response to anticipated economic trends. Not only were the policies short-sighted, but the economic predictions that inspired them never materialized. Moreover, teachers at community colleges will not be helped by any rush to hire new faculty in colleges and universities. Nor will graduate teaching assistants be less exploited even given changes in the job market. And the sad truth is that in seeking "promising young scholars," institutions may well overlook those who have been laboring in their very own vineyards because part-time and adjunct faculty members holding advanced degrees are inhibited by their conditions of employment from developing their scholarly talents.

No other professional organization has come forward with any proposal that would allow teachers of writing to take direct action at their own institutions against unfair practices that are now endemic. If you wish to join in the spirit of the Wyoming Conference, pay your membership dues and come to the CCCC conference to vote in favor of the Wyoming Conference Resolution. Urge your colleagues to do the same. We look forward to voting with you to pass this resolution.