In "Composition as Management Science," Marc Bousquet takes on the question of how to improve working conditions for writing teachers. He argues that collective action by faculty is the only route to real reform and identifies the "managerial subjectivity" (494) of writing program administrators (WPAs) as an obstacle to change. While I don’t recognize this subjectivity as my own, Bousquet figures me as one of its exemplars through his reading of my essay, "Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss: Class Consciousness in Composition." Since my aim in that essay was to urge WPAs to "side with the needs of undergraduates and their teachers" (58), I am puzzled to find myself cast as the blue-eyed boy of corporate higher education, whose intent is to "obscure the interests and voice of those who teach composition in sub-faculty conditions, ultimately to the advantage of university management" (499). This is not true.

Bousquet forms his picture of me as a tool of management in large part through a process of displacement, in which something I say reminds him of something else, which reminds him of something else, which reminds him of something else—which he then objects to. For instance, in response to my call to "[join] the interests of [comp] bosses and workers around the issue of good teaching for fair pay" (45), he tells us: "Living in a ‘right to work’ state, I have to say that my first reading of this evidently sincere rubric literally gave me a chill." (514). Bousquet is being disingenuous here, since he notes later in his article that in fact I support collective bargaining (518; Harris, "Meet" 61; "Beyond” 10). But he seems less interested in responding to my position than in offering
a series of associative riffs on my phrasing. He goes on: "At its most disturbing, this is Toyotist rhetoric clothed in academic Marxism, grafting the total-quality 'team' of management and labor onto disciplinary identity. . ." (514). At this point, I'm not sure what Bousquet is talking about. I don't know what Toyotist rhetoric is (YO!); I have never used the language of "teams" or TQM; I fail to see where the jargon of academic Marxism inflects my phrasings; and I criticize composition's fussing over its status as a discipline (54). But things get worse. Bousquet next suggests that my rhetoric "sounds exactly like the old 'partnership between labor and capital' rhetoric of nineteenth-century anti-unionism, inked most famously by the dean of American political cartoonists, Thomas Nast" (516). He reproduces Nast's cartoon, claiming that it represents "exactly the sort of principle that Harris suggests," concluding that

Fortunately for the rest of us, the nineteenth-century labor movement rejected this rhetoric and worked in solidarity to establish the eight-hour day, reductions in the exploitation of youth and student labor, a more just wage, health benefits, release time for education and recreation, a safer workplace, and so on. And the contemporary labor movement in the academy will reject Harris' rhetoric as well. (516)

Having thus been reduced to a caricature, literally, it is hard to know where to begin: Do I need to note that I oppose child labor and support the eight-hour workday? Or can I bring us back to the present and point out that in my essay I propose several ways "to improve the working conditions of all teachers of writing" (60)? Bousquet offers no analysis of my writing to support his insinuation that I am an anti-unionist. Instead, his argument rests on a string of tenuous equivalencies which carry him further and further away from my actual position: "good teaching for fair pay" = "right-to-work" = "Toyotism" = "nineteenth-century anti-unionism." He ends up opposing something I have not argued for.

Similarly, at the start of his essay, Bousquet describes "managerial insiders" who follow

a general train of thinking in rhetoric and composition scholarship emphasizing how to "make arguments" that will be "convincing" to those "with the power" inside the institution (see, for example, Harris, Miller, Murphy, and Grimm). (494)
As the first-cited proponent of this "general train of thinking," I looked back to "Meet the New Boss" to see where I might have urged such a strategy of obeisance and cajolery. But I don't in fact use any of the phrases Bousquet puts in quotation marks, and I don't anywhere suggest that the goal of a WPA should be to play a game of "pleasing the prince" (494). Bousquet suggests that I have "constructed" the WPA as a "canny bureaucrat/pragmatist boss" (519), but that is again neither my language nor argument. I believe that WPAs need to be forthright advocates of writing students and their teachers, that we should use what influence we can gain to hold universities to the goal of educating critical citizens. There is nothing canny or even subtle about this position. Similarly, if Bousquet means by pragmatist someone who is reconciled to working within the system as it stands—who is willing, for instance, to administer a program based on the labor of underpaid adjuncts and TAs while waiting for a day when all writing teachers will be put on the tenure-track—then I am not a pragmatist. I believe we need to work for change now.

One more example. At the close of his section on "The Heroic WPA," Bousquet notes that

There is therefore a certain honesty in the tendency of some compositionists to urge the rest of the discipline to "admit" and embrace their "complicity" in a "corporate system" (see Harris 51-52; Miller, "Arts"). (500)

But this seeming quotation turns my position on its head. What I wrote in "Meet the New Boss" was that to encourage "a skepticism towards the claims of a supposed meritocracy," we need "to admit that we are indeed workers in a corporate system that we hope to reform" (51). Bousquet lifts a few terms from this sentence and reinserts them into a composite pseudoquotation—I have no idea where "embrace their 'complicity'" comes from—that makes it appear that I urge acquiescence rather than skepticism. Why work so hard to pick a fight?

Throughout his essay, Bousquet speaks of critical theory as a vanguard of progressive thought in English departments. I take a contrary view in "Meet the New Boss," arguing that theory has been of little help in breaking down the unfair divisions of labor in English departments and, indeed, that tenured professors of theory and literature have, as a class, benefited from those divisions. All of the writers Bousquet targets as technocrats are compositionists (James Porter et al., Richard Miller, Michael Murphy, myself); almost all of the theorists he calls on to support
his vision of a manager-less university are (except for Marx himself) English professors or cultural critics: Michael Bérubé, Patrick Brantlinger, David Downing, David Harvey, Fredric Jameson, Annette Kolodny, Cary Nelson, Andrew Ross, Evan Watkins. Although these scholars write as leftists, several express a marked disdain for the labor of teaching writing. For instance, Michael Bérubé:

"World writing in English," I think, at least holds out the appropriate prospect of making literary study more cultural, and cultural studies more literary, regardless of how many warm bodies are processed by Composition next semester (34-35)

and Cary Nelson:

[Our graduate students] teach remedial rhetoric and composition for disadvantaged students. Indeed, they train at intensively tutoring remedial students. Short of practicing community college groundskeeping or high school lunch room monitoring it's not immediately clear what more our students could do to prepare themselves for the service jobs of the future. (199-200)

A familiar disciplinary tension thus runs beneath the discourse of management and labor in English, as composition is persistently imagined as the instrumentalist Other of literature. I'm tired of this argument. The site of work I am concerned with is not the English department but the college writing program. And while I see how housing composition serves the disciplinary and economic needs of English, I worry that this setup often fails to work in the interests of writing students and their teachers.

Before I came to Duke University, I directed the composition program in the English department of a large university. About half of the courses I supervised were staffed by graduate teaching assistants who had been selected by an admissions committee less for their promise in the classroom than for their potential as scholars or creative writers. Many of these TAs taught very well, but a significant number taught badly or with cynical indifference. I was not able to refuse such TAs employment, however, even when I knew their work was mediocre. This could only be done by a vote of the graduate faculty to terminate a fellowship—which was almost never done. Indeed, the usual reward for teaching composition badly was to teach more of it, since the directors of the other programs in the department (literature, film, creative writing) were usually reluc-
tant to offer courses to TAs with poor teaching records. About another third of the composition sections were taught by adjunct faculty—many of whom taught well, some of whom did not. Several of those who taught poorly were on staff because they were the protégés or spouses of powerful professors. A small number of writing courses were taught by full-time faculty, who pretty much did whatever they wanted. My point is that, as director of this program, I had little ability to reward teachers who did well or to put constructive pressure on those who did not. In this, my situation typified that of many WPAs in large or mid-sized English departments.

It doesn’t advance the cause of undergraduate education or academic labor to hire people to teach writing for any other reason than they’re good at it—or at least show a strong promise for becoming so. This is why I argued in “Meet the New Boss” for more autonomy for writing programs and more control for their directors. Decisions about who should teach in a composition program should be made by persons whose first concern is with the quality of work in that program—not with the overall well being of the English department or its graduate program. Bousquet reads this position as expressing a desire to increase the managerial control of WPAs over faculty. My intent is the opposite: I want to loosen the grasp of graduate programs in English on the teaching of composition and to professionalize the ways in which teachers of writing are hired, evaluated, and rewarded. My goal is not to increase the power or status of WPAs, but to see that people who know and care about what they are doing are assigned to teach writing to beginning undergraduates.

How to achieve this goal is something we need to talk more about. Bousquet argues that it should ideally be “other teachers, as in other disciplines” (515) who make decisions about hiring and curriculum in writing programs. I agree, although I also feel that he slight the difficulties of transferring power to what is still a contingent labor force in many programs. How are we to move from programs staffed in large part by TAs and part-timers to self-governing collectives of full-time faculty members? Bousquet is vague on this point, although he suggests that a first step would be for many of those few tenure-track professors who have invested their careers in the teaching of writing (that is, WPAs) to withdraw from positions of influence. But I don’t understand why this would be an effective tactical move to make in trying to help less well-positioned writing teachers claim more authority over their work. While I agree with Bousquet that WPAs can’t effect significant change in the
academy on their own, if I was (still) a non-tenure-track instructor of writing, I'd want them on my side. That's the point I was trying to make in "Meet the New Boss": WPAs need to press to have writing teachers hired and evaluated for their effectiveness as writing teachers—and not for anything else.

I believe that we can measure the success of writing programs in two ways: How well do they teach students to write as critics and intellectuals? And how fairly do they treat their faculty? These questions are inextricably joined. I cannot imagine a writing program that serves students well but exploits its faculty. But while Bousquet has much to say about the rights of teachers, he says almost nothing about the needs of students—except at one point to suggest that the "managerialism of composition discourse" invokes a "rhetoric of 'student need' and 'customer service'" to create a "university of job-readiness." This management discourse, Bousquet claims, "threatens to take the place of intellectual life altogether" (513). As I said in "Meet the New Boss," I am pleased to think of my work as a service to students as growing intellectuals. But I defy Bousquet to point to any moment in my writing where I picture this work in terms of "customer service" or "job-readiness." And I reject any stance that slightsthe needs of students in the name of teachers. Students are what basic and first-year writing programs are for and about. This is not to say that undergraduates need to be catered to as consumers of higher education, or trained as future corporate employees, or disciplined as potential members of the academic professions, but that it is our job as teachers to open the possibilities of intellectual work to them. It angers me to hear appeals to the needs of students dismissed as opportunistic moves on the part of university management. If as teachers we fail to insist that students are the reason for our work, then we invite others to speak in their name instead.

I apologize for centering this response on Bousquet's tendentious use of my writing. But I have two reasons for doing so. The first has to do with his claim to have defined a "general train of thinking" in composition. I hope I have made it clear that I am not on that train—and thus perhaps to have raised some doubts about how general it may be. The second has to do with the context of this argument. Bousquet teaches at the University of Louisville in an English department whose tenure-track faculty has chosen to re-involve themselves in the teaching of first-year composition. I direct an independent writing program at Duke that employs an interdisciplinary group of postdoctoral fellows to teach first-year academic writing. I worry that readers will be tempted to decide that, on principle,
one of these structures is the correct way to staff writing programs and thus that the other is wrong.

That would be a mistake. Different contexts call for varying approaches to improving working conditions for writing teachers. I admire the experiment at Louisville. One can only hope that English departments at other universities will follow suit. As Bousquet notes, too many composition programs are still staffed by "a revolving labor force of graduate employees and other contingent teachers" (500). But this is not the case at Duke, where almost all of our sections of first-year writing are taught by a cadre of twenty-five postdoctoral fellows on three-to-five year contracts. Fellows are asked to design and teach seminars in academic writing that draw on their disciplinary training, and a diverse set of scholars has joined us to do so—including PhDs in anthropology, architecture, biology, economics, education, engineering, epidemiology, history, linguistics, literature, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, rhetoric, and sociology. Our program thus defines writing as a concern not of English alone but of the faculty as a whole. Students rate the courses they take with our fellows highly. The teaching load is kept low (60 students per year) and salary and benefits are competitive. Fellows have a full voice in determining our course goals and program policies, and they sit on all program committees, including by-laws and hiring. We work hard to support their growth as both teachers and scholars, and several fellows have drawn on their experiences at Duke in landing tenure-track assistant professorships at other colleges and universities.

Would it be better if these fellowships were tenure-track professorships? Yes, of course. Is such a proposal—which would turn the writing program into a large and influential department—likely to be considered soon at many universities? No. We thus need to look for more immediate ways to support the work of writing teachers.

Bousquet hails the campaigns of teacher unions at NYU, Michigan, and California State to gain better working conditions for their members (521). I applaud such efforts too. In 1986, as a non-tenure-track instructor, I walked a picket line as part of a faculty strike at Temple University, and in the 1990s I worked for two (failed) attempts to organize a faculty union at the University of Pittsburgh. I'd vote for a union at Duke, and I'd welcome the chance, as an administrator, to act on the collective will of the writing faculty. This doesn't mean that I want to do away with tenure. On the contrary, I have argued to make the teaching of writing a concern of tenure-track faculty ("Meet" 63-64; "Beyond" 10). But I think it jejune
to criticize efforts to establish attractive non-tenure-track positions for writing teachers in little more than the hope that the whole problem might just go away if only composition could somehow be made a discipline like the rest.

My goal is not to establish composition as a discipline but to make basic and first-year writing programs more vibrant places in which to teach and learn. To do so, we need to support the work of students and their teachers as strongly as we can. And to do that, we need to discuss not discourses and subjectivities but practices, ways of acting in the world. And so, now that Bousquet is done with the kill-all-the-lawyers part of his argument, I'd like to hear more about how he thinks we might take a more collective approach to running writing programs. That would be a discussion worth having.

Duke University
Durham, North Carolina

Notes

1. See Olson and Moxley's "Directing Freshman Composition: The Limits of Authority," as well as the many narratives offered by WPAs in Janangelo and Hansen.

Works Cited


———. "Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss: Class Consciousness in Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 52 (2000): 43–68.

Managing Comp

Evan Watkins

Let me say immediately that I share Marc Bousquet’s central assumption as it appears in the second paragraph of his essay: “I prefer instead a labor [Bousquet’s emphasis] theory of agency and a rhetoric of solidarity, aimed at constituting, nurturing, and empowering collective action by persons in a group.” Given that conditions vary widely from one institution to another, however, and given that the labor force directly involved in composition instruction typically involves multiple groups, sometimes with conflicting interests, the constitution of “group” solidarity in any specific instance is neither obvious nor something that can be determined in advance. Graduate students, often from different disciplines; part-time and adjunct instructors; instructors on one-, two- or three-year renewable contracts; instructors in their third, fourth (or more) three-year renewable contract periods; postdocs on fixed term with partial research support in addition to their composition responsibilities; tenure-track and occasionally already tenured instructors—any or all of the above might be involved in composition instruction at a given time in a given institution. There’s no reason to assume automatically that any “rhetoric of solidarity” might equally well serve these potentially very disparate groups. Nevertheless, all this can be recognized without flipping immediately to the opposite extreme of arguing that agency must then necessarily be so individuated that collective action of any sort becomes a naïve or anachronistic dream. Bousquet’s argument already supplies sufficient evidence to the contrary.