Redefining Work and Value for Writing Program Administration

Bruce Horner

In this essay, I focus on problematic ways in which work in composition is defined and valued in dominant Writing Program Administration (WPA) discourse as well as in much of the discourse of unionism emerging in response to that discourse. My argument is that in the claims they make for its value, these discourses contribute to the debasement of both WPA work and the work of composition generally. By effectively accepting terms of valuation by which this work must be judged negatively, they contribute to its denigration: the seemingly inevitable angst of the WPA and the poor working conditions of composition teachers so prevalent in colleges and universities across North America. To the extent that negotiating improvements in the conditions of both forms of work in composition involves invocations of particular values, WPAs and those who work under their “administration” must beware of invoking values that effectively undermine their positions.

I begin by examining confusion in the kinds of value accorded work in composition and the role of commodification in the valuation of that work. I then show the operation of this confusion in specific arguments for the value of work in composition: the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ position statement “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration” and recent exchanges in composition forums about labor relations in composition. The discourses in these venues, I argue, participate in commodifications of the work of composition that operate to the detriment of its value in the economies in which those commodities circulate. They do so by occluding the labor involved in the realization of the value of that work, distorting and undercutting its demands and its potential as work both within and on the social.

jac 27.1–2 (2007)
Arguments for the value of both the work of WPAs and the work of composition teaching itself are frequently marred by confusing the various forms of exchange and use values to be realized from that work, and by neglecting the contingent nature of any potential exchange value itself. The relationship between the value of each type of work is also confused by how the relationship itself is defined: both how the work of the WPA is understood to be related to the work of teaching composition (and vice versa), and also how the value of each form of work is understood to be related to the value of the other. Of course, central to any discussion of the value of work is the concept of commodification. Labor is commodified when the value of the product of that labor is identified as an objective property of the product itself (see Marx 153–54). In this identification, the concrete labor involved in producing the value is largely occluded. Ordinarily, this is understood to mean that the labor of those who appear to be most directly involved in the making of a product—the labor of steel mill workers, say, in making steel, or coal miners in mining coal—is not given its due; instead, the difference between the value of these workers’ labor and the price at which the product is sold is “realized”—that is, taken—by the capitalist as profit. Hence, the workers are said to be exploited by the capitalist.

Without discounting the real exploitation of workers in this manner, such exploitation is not all there is to commodification. While such exploitation occludes some of the value of the labor of those involved in producing the commodity—again, say, steel or coal—the use value of that commodity itself is realized through a host of concrete labor practices. The “value” of a computer, for example, at least according to most of those seeking one, can be realized only under particular conditions: reliable electrical and telecommunication infrastructure, a mass of individuals with training in computers, a demand for the kinds of information that computers are “equipped” to store and produce, and so on. While it’s certain that the workers involved in making computer hardware and software are exploited, the labor occluded through commodification of the computer includes not only their labor but the labor of all those
involved in the practices responsible for the value of computers: for the infrastructure, the training, a society that believes it needs the kind of information that can be stored and generated only by computers, and so on. Through commodification, the entire material social process by which particular values are realized is occluded. It is in this sense that commodification denies the full social materiality of work. And it is in this sense that dominant WPA discourse and dominant discourse on unionism participate in the commodification of the work of composition.

The participation of dominant WPA discourse in this commodification takes two forms distinguished by the particular economy of value in which the discourse is exercised. Within the economy of academic positions of hiring, tenure, and promotion, in which scholarly work carries greater value than forms of work deemed "service" or "teaching," WPA work is defined as valuable insofar as it is "intellectual." Within the larger social economies of tuition revenue and marketable skills, the value of WPA work, and along with it the value of the work of teaching composition, is defined in terms of the tuition earned through writing programs and the marketable skills that writing programs ostensibly produce. What links both despite their differences is their occlusion of the social materiality of the work: the location of that work in specific concrete labor practices and material social conditions. And insofar as WPA work, like the work of teaching composition generally, is located more undeniably in such practices and conditions, discourses that claim value for the work in terms of its distance from these inevitably put those involved in that work at a disadvantage in comparison to those who can more credibly deny the materiality of their work.

**The Value of Composition Work as "Intellectual"**

We can see examples of this first form of valuation in the document "Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration," a position statement of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (hereafter "Evaluating"). "Evaluating" is not aimed at countering the ways in which the academic work of writing program administrators is commonly evaluated. As its title suggests, it accepts that forms of work that can in
some fashion be identified as "intellectual" ought to be rewarded. The question it addresses, instead, is how to make the work of WPAs more readily identifiable as "intellectual" so that those evaluating WPA work can better determine its worth within the academic economy, what the document identifies as "the system of academic judgments and rewards we are all familiar with." As it states, "[O]ur concern in this document is to present a framework by which writing administration can be seen as scholarly work and therefore subject to the same kinds of evaluation as other forms of disciplinary production, such as books, articles, and reviews."

The problem WPAs face, according to the authors, is that WPA work does not appear in the forms that most academics recognize as evidence of scholarship: university press books, refereed journal articles. Instead, it resembles too closely forms of work that have come to be recognized as "service," which has little to no exchange value within the academic institution's economy of faculty status and rewards. To illustrate this problem, they present several hypothetical cases of junior tenure-line English faculty.

In their hypothetical example of Assistant Professor Mary C., literary scholar and poet, Mary's work—"refereed articles, poems in magazines with good literary reputations, and a book with a major university press"—is understood to be "the production of specific commodities (albeit scholarly commodities) with a clear exchange value, perhaps not on the general market but certainly in academic institutions." By contrast, in their hypothetical example case of Cheryl W., overworked assistant professor and writing program administrator, many of Cheryl's department colleagues "are not sure that she has been doing 'real work.' Others, who think her efforts have been valuable to the department, have difficulty specifying her accomplishments other than stating that 'she has done an excellent job running the writing program.'"

What Cheryl must do, the authors state, is demonstrate the intellectual value of her work to distinguish it from service, which is assumed to be evidence not of intellectual value but of professional citizenship, "doing good." To help Cheryl and others facing similar predicaments, the authors of "Evaluating," drawing largely on the 1996 report of the MLA Commission on Professional Service document "Making Faculty Work
Visible” and Ernest Boyer’s *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, suggest work ordinarily recognized as mere “service” can nonetheless be identified “as part of scholarship if it derives from and is reinforced by scholarly knowledge and disciplinary understanding.” Thus, rather than attempting to challenge the current terms of the academic economy that understands scholarship, teaching, and service as distinctive, “Evaluating,” like “Making Faculty Work Visible” and Boyer’s argument, retains the terms of evaluation but argues that scholarship can be located in forms other than the traditional ones of the book or research article. It does so by applying the criteria by which the traditional forms of scholarship are evaluated to forms that WPA work typically takes. Such work is deemed intellectual, the authors of “Evaluating” explain, “when it meets two tests. First, it needs to advance knowledge—its production, clarification, connection, reinterpretation, or application. Second, it results in products or activities that can be evaluated by others.”

Thus, “Evaluating” participates in treating the work of both Mary and Cheryl (and, as well, Mary and Cheryl themselves) as commodities. It does so by removing “their” work from the full material social process of which it is a part and renaming it, or attempting to rename it, as “theirs”: products they produce by themselves, and whose value is inherent in the product. In the hypothetical case of Mary, for example, it ignores Mary’s possible course releases and grants, access to libraries and research assistance, and the entire industry of literary scholarship—journals, institutional subscriptions, English departments—within which Mary’s work is possible and takes on meaning and particular value. If we were to view Mary’s vita, it would be apparent that Mary understandably (like all her colleagues) claims as her own accomplishments work that in fact she alone could not accomplish or even conceive of attempting.

The difficulty Cheryl faces in making similar claims about the work in which she engages is that its location in that material social process—like most work identified as “service” work in the academy—is far more difficult to elide. The authors of “Evaluating” identify five categories of work characteristic of WPA work—program creation, curricular design, faculty development, program assessment and evaluation, and program-
related textual production—and they recommend that the WPA “create a portfolio that reflects her or his scholarly and intellectual accomplish-
ments as an administrator.” But this presumes that such accomplishments can be identifiable as the administrator’s own—as commodities that the WPA has produced. In practice, however, WPA work is virtually impos-
sible to identify as a set of individual accomplishments. The authors of “Evaluating” invoke what they term the “intellectual character” of this work to mark it as commodifiable. Such work, they argue, “can be considered as part of scholarship if it derives from and is reinforced by scholarly knowledge and disciplinary understanding.” It is scholarly, that is, insofar as it derives from scholarship, already understood as the sort of commodity “produced” by Mary C.

It is difficult, however, to argue that WPA work has an “intellectual” character that can distinguish it in this way from the work of academic “professional citizenship.” In saying this, I am not adopting the anti-
intellectual position of claiming that scholarship has nothing to contrib-
ute to the work of WPAs. It does, and all writing programs can benefit from such scholarship. Instead, I am saying that such scholarship is only one of several factors that shape the “accomplishments” that WPAs might otherwise wish to claim as their own, as “products.” While this is true of all scholarship, it is more readily recognizable as true of WPA work, and most academics have a vested interest in recognizing the “social” char-
acter of WPA work and refusing to recognize its “intellectual” character. WPA work, like “women’s” work, appears to be more “shared” (and therefore somehow less “real”) than other work, when, indeed, it is recognized as “work” at all.

For example, the work of faculty development and program creation by definition requires contributions from multiple individuals and institu-
tional units. As the authors of “Evaluating” acknowledge, “Staff development cannot be accomplished by fiat. Instructors cannot simply be ordered and coerced, no matter how subordinate their position within the university.” The authors argue that the success of staff development depends primarily on “the degree to which those being administered value and respect the writing administrator,” which they take to result from the ability of the WPA to “incorporate current research and theory into the training” and to “demonstrate that knowledge through both word
and deed.” But there is no reason to believe that staff value and respect WPAs strictly as a result of their assessment of the WPA’s knowledge of current research and theory. Typically, staff members are not in a position to recognize, let alone evaluate, the WPA’s command of this knowledge. Like the “periphery” scholars described by A. Suresh Canagarajah, they commonly lack access to the resources necessary to making such evaluations, most obviously time. What they might recognize as “new research and theory” may well be anything but. Further, as typically overworked staff, they may have a vested interest in rejecting a WPA’s attempts to introduce programmatic changes informed by such research and theory when it means significant disruptions to their practices, even if they were in a position to recognize or even value it as “new.” But in any event, as “staff” they lack by definition the institutional status of being “experts” whose “recognition” would confer value on the WPA’s knowledge. Whatever knowledge staff may “possess” as practitioners of teaching composition is likely to count for little in the economy of academic work—typically not as knowledge at all—because it does not take forms recognized as knowledge within that economy.

Moreover, much of the work of staff and faculty development that the authors of “Evaluating” identify has little to do with “knowledge of current research and theory.” For example, providing “financial support for staff activities in course design, pedagogical development, and research” is typically not within the WPA’s control alone, nor does it require particular scholarly knowledge. It requires, instead, at the very least a supportive dean or provost. Thus, whether or not a WPA “succeeds” in providing such support is difficult to identify as either the WPA’s own responsibility or an intellectual “accomplishment.” Similarly, “maintain[ing] an atmosphere of openness and support for the development and sharing of effective teaching ideas and curricular emphases . . . [and] open lines of communication among administrators, support staff, and faculty,” which the authors of “Evaluating” identify as necessary to staff development, may require particular skills, but not any reified scholarly knowledge of composition and rhetoric. And insofar as “communication” is, by definition, two way, whether or not the “lines” are “open” is not something for which the WPA alone can be held responsible, for praise or blame.
The authors of "Evaluating" themselves allude to this in some of their comments. For example, while stressing that "program creation" ought to be informed by "significant disciplinary knowledge, a national perspective that takes into account the successes and failures of other composition programs, and a combined practical and theoretical understanding of learning theory, the composing process, the philosophy of composition, rhetorical theory, etc.," they also acknowledge that often writing programs fail simply "on the basis of budget and ideology." While the authors claim as well that programs fail because of a lack of "scholarly foundation," there is no reason to believe that this is the case. Writing programs that defy the disciplinary knowledge of composition and rhetoric can be highly "successful" (and vice versa): it depends on how failure and success are measured (and by whom), which returns us to issues of "budget and ideology."

More significantly, in their attempt to claim the intellectual character of WPA work, the authors of "Evaluating" inevitably reveal both the intellectual character of all work and its social materiality. We can see hints of this in their nervousness about distinguishing some textual production from others as somehow more "intellectual." "Clearly," they insist, "boundaries must be set; not every memo, descriptive comment, or teaching evaluation embodies the concept of intellectual work." But as work in literacy studies and everyday cognition has shown, it's not at all clear how to determine the degree to which a text might or might not embody intellectual work. Moreover, as literacy scholarship has also demonstrated, if the concept of intellectual work includes the concept of individual authorship, then no writing can fully embody that concept insofar as all literacy is a "social" rather than "individual" achievement (see Scribner). And authorship of the kinds of documents they identify as typical of WPAs—course syllabi, funding proposals, statements of teaching philosophy, resource materials for staff—are notoriously collaborative, texts of "the program" rather than the WPA him or herself.

The authors' nervousness about setting boundaries is understandable, since, as I have argued elsewhere, such boundaries are necessary for maintaining the ideological division between physical and intellectual labor serving class and gender interests by designating some labor as
more intellectual, and hence "higher" in worth, than others, and therefore more deserving of status and rewards (Terms 7–9). The authors’ concern for how WPAs can claim as commodities all those activities that are demonstrably not the "product" of the individual WPA alone is understandable in light of the requirement for individual WPAs to make such claims in order to continue their employment: the authors want to help create a more "level" playing field for the real-life counterparts to their hypothetical cases of junior tenure-line faculty. They acknowledge that "[a]ctivities other than research and teaching . . . have little exchange value, no matter how highly they might be valued on an individual basis by fellow faculty, by administrators, or society"; hence, they attempt to show ways by which exchange value might nonetheless be conferred on these activities by redefining them from being "service" to being "scholarship" in light of their "intellectual" character. In doing so, however, they overlook the threat that their claims for the intellectuality of what is ordinarily deemed "service" work poses to the interests responsible for the designation of such work as service to begin with and that such designations continue to serve. By inadvertently calling attention to the productive force of social relations generally in academic work, the authors of "Evaluating" reveal the limitations in the rules of the game being played on the field of tenure and promotion. In short, the fact that colleagues have difficulty recognizing WPA work as "real" (that is, "intellectual," and therefore "worthy of recognition and reward") is not simply a matter of unintended ignorance to be addressed through communication but the manifestation of an ideological perspective serving particular interests—here, the colleagues’ interest in denying the location of all academic work, including the colleagues’ “own” work, in the material social realm and thus dependent on material social conditions that WPA work, like the composition programs they administer, makes possible. Like dominant culture’s pairing of its praise for wives and mothers with a refusal to recognize what they do as work or as contributions to the work ascribed to others (for example, husbands), faculty’s inevitable coupling of their inevitable expressions of gratitude to WPAs with a firm denial of the intellectual value of WPA’s work is ideological, an interested withholding of recognition and value.
The Value of Composition Work as Skills Production

There are two alternative strategies by which the value of the work of composition—both the work of the WPA and the work of teaching composition—is sometimes pursued. First, instead of calling on terms of evaluation operating among faculty, in which faculty are judged according to their production of (abstract) knowledge, the work of composition is claimed to have value insofar as it produces tuition dollars for the institution and “skills” (in students) for society. WPAs in particular are often tempted to justify their programs in these terms. For example, both composition teachers and WPAs might argue that composition teachers deserve higher pay in light of the FTE’s they produce and the crucial importance (to the university and society at large) of the writing skills they impart. As John Trimbur has noted, composition studies was in one sense one of the few beneficiaries of the 1975 national hue and cry about a putative “literacy crisis” heralded by “Why Johnny Can’t Write.” Like those lined up, following Sputnik, with hands open to receive funding to fight communism through teaching French, compositionists could argue that the usefulness of their work to the nation merited better funding.

However, as shown by feminist critiques of composition (and mothering and housework), by the current salaries of many CEOs, by truckdrivers’ wages, as well as by the current poor working conditions and status of composition teachers, there is no one-to-one correspondence between “usefulness,” social status, and pay (see Holbrook, Miller, Schell, Tuell). To argue that composition teachers somehow deserve better pay in light of the importance of their work is to assume that, in general, such a correspondence exists—to assume that CEO salaries are the mathematical expression of the vital character of their particular contributions to society, for example—and that there has simply been a miscalculation that has resulted in composition teachers’ abysmal working conditions. In other words, such arguments are based on two kinds of confusion regarding value. First, they confuse exchange value—the value accorded a commodity on the “market”—with use value. This ignores the fact that exchange value is conferred through recognition, and hence is ideological. Second, such arguments participate in the commodification of the use value of an activity (here, teaching composi-
tion) that by definition occludes the role of labor and the material social process in the realization of that value. They do so by claiming that composition teaching does in fact impart objective “skills” that will have the same use wherever they are employed. However, as scholarship has shown, it is difficult to identify, let alone teach, general writing skills (see Petraglia), and thus common for students who appear to do well in learning to write in particular ways for composition courses to have trouble, at least initially, when faced with novel writing tasks (for example, writing in an unfamiliar genre or about an unfamiliar topic or for an unfamiliar audience). Those claiming that composition instruction, properly funded, will produce student-citizens armed with the necessary writing skills are thus asking instructors to be judged according to their ability to produce something that, in fact, they are not in a position to produce. The cycles of complaints about a writing crisis (usually accompanied by strident complaints about the poor quality of writing instruction), followed by pleas for greater funding, followed by complaints about the futility of “throwing money at problems,” followed by a writing crisis, evince this problem. Such arguments and the cycle of crises/pleas/complaints are also likely to spawn calls for more efficient means of producing these putative writing skills—through use of online outsourcing of grading, for example (see, for example, Banocy-Payne, Pearson, Smarthinking). Within institutions, moreover, such claims contribute to the low status of composition as mere preparatory “service” work more properly the task of high schools or, at best, two-year colleges, for according to the terms of the academy’s economy of status and rewards, composition’s ostensible economic exchange value of writing skills undermines its cultural exchange value—again, as the ongoing, and long, history of low status and poor pay for writing instruction attests.

Ethics And The Value of Composition Work

A second strategy for arguing for the value of composition work alternative to either its intellectual value or the usefulness of the commodities it produces is the argument of justice. Arguments adopting this strategy are found in both the discourse of unionism and WPA discourse. At their
worst, such arguments sacrifice historical accuracy and effectivity for a patina of moral righteousness and outrage, as in some of the rhetoric of "abolition" and its characterizations of WPAs as "boss" compositionist overseers of an enslaved labor force (see, for example, Sledd), and in arguments that herald teacher unions as the solution to, rather than a beginning strategy for addressing, the problem of poor working conditions (see Rhoades, "Afterword"). While at their best, some of the arguments for justice engage in the kind of crucial utopian thinking that forwards the struggle for that justice, typically, in making the case for what should be, these arguments neglect details of the concrete reality that is. Invoking the discourse of ethics, in short, denies the operation of material history and concrete labor in the pursuit of ethical achievement.

To highlight these problems, let me focus on three recent exchanges: the exchange over (and including) Marc Bousquet's essay "Composition as Management Science"; the recent collection (edited by Bousquet and others) Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University; and a series of summer 2005 postings on the WPA-Listserv about "Work load, vacation time, and course release." Bousquet's essay, which has appeared in somewhat different forms in JAC, the Minnesota Review, and as the lead chapter of Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers (which Bousquet co-edited), has prompted a variety of responses both in a subsequent issue of JAC and on the WPA-Listserv, as well as elsewhere (see Grabill et al.; Harris, "Behind"; Horner, Review; O'Neill). For the purposes of this essay, what is most salient about the exchange surrounding Bousquet's essay is the disjunction between the appeal to justice in light of a utopian vision of what should be and a concern with immediate and historical specificity. Briefly, I read Bousquet to be arguing against a "managerial" discourse in composition because of its paternalistic treatment of composition teachers, and to be arguing for an organization of composition programs in which a collective of composition teachers with the right to collective bargaining and tenure would determine collaboratively the composition curriculum.

On its face, it is difficult to argue against such positions: paternalistic treatment is at best ethically suspect, all workers should have the right to collective bargaining, and collaborative decision-making about matters
such as curriculum sounds ideal. And to my knowledge, none of the critics of Bousquet's essay argue for paternalism as an ethically sound arrangement nor against collective bargaining or collaborative decision-making. Instead, they fault Bousquet for drawing inaccurate comparisons between past labor history and current labor conditions for composition teachers (Harris 892), for ignoring the role of English departments, and especially literature faculty, in contributing to those conditions (O'Neill 908–11), and for being naïve about how a collective comprised of current composition instructors might work in practice (O'Neill 912). In short, they fault Bousquet for failing to ground his argument fully in the past and ongoing history of composition. While Bousquet's argument is good at identifying what, ideally, a writing program should be like, it is idealistic in imagining how to get "Toward a University without a WPA" by failing to recognize the point(s) from which those who work in composition, in whatever capacity, might be coming (see Harris 895). For example, while a collective of teachers determining the composition curriculum in collaborative fashion might sound good in theory, it's difficult to see how to get there from here very fast in a way that would not lead to a seriously problematic curriculum (on this possibility, see Lipson and Voorheis 123–25).

The very poverty of the conditions in which most adjunct composition teachers work that is lamented by both Bousquet and his critics means that those teachers do not have the resources of time, space, leisure, or access to scholarship to make decisions responsibly about composition curricula. For example, in "Teaching Writing in a Managed Environment," Eric Marshall reports that despite being a wholly unprepared and inexperienced graduate student, he was assigned to teach two basic writing courses for sub-living wages, no health care, and no office space in which to conduct mandatory office hours (see also McConnel). A collective comprised of instructors similarly situated would be ill-equipped to design or revise curricula. In light of the fact that at least some WPAs are equally ill-equipped to undertake such work (see, for example, Vaughn and Roskelly), the presence of tenure-line WPAs with at least some training and knowledge in composition and provided with some material support to enable them to undertake such work is an encouraging sign rather than a step to be lamented, evidence of some recognition of the
fact that teaching requires knowledge that can result only with sufficient resources of time, training, and access. Arguments that otherwise show great awareness of the limitations imposed by current working conditions on composition teachers that then advocate assigning tasks like curriculum design to those working under such conditions deny, ironically, the conditions necessary to carry out such tasks.

Such arguments operate in concert with more common arguments about collective bargaining that focus almost exclusively on questions of hourly wages and job security. Such arguments, rehearsing dominant trends in U.S. labor, end up ceding much of the control over concrete work activities by foregrounding only some aspects of the materiality of their work (see Luke 309–10). By focusing almost exclusively on questions of hours and pay, they leave unquestioned, and contribute to, the commodification of work: all work, no matter by whom, comes to be viewed as having equivalent value: an hour’s work for an hour’s pay, no matter the worker or the material social specificities of that hour’s activities.

A comparable neglect of the specificities of material social history is evident in some of the dominant discourse on unionism invoked in some of the chapters of the collection Tenured Bosses (as well as elsewhere). This appears to have prompted Gary Rhoades to warn in his Afterword to that collection that in many of the chapters unionization is posed as the answer to the current challenges faced by those who work in composition, rather than as a strategy, “the contested beginning of an exploration, and a means to an end, not an ending, or an end in itself” (264). Such discourse elides the long and ongoing history of labor relations and collective bargaining in the U.S. as well as elsewhere, most remarkably the history of unionizing K-12 teachers, invoking such histories if at all in general and consequently unhelpful or misleading ways. (For notable exceptions, see Godley and Trainor; Hendricks; Luke; Rhoades, Managed). That history (and those histories) would surely prompt legitimate questions, not simply about what is morally right, but what might be effective (or ineffective) strategically for workers in composition to attempt. After all, the history of unions in the U.S. is replete with false starts, missteps, cooptation, divisiveness, and corruption as well as radical successes in democratizing workplaces and society, improving the lives and working
conditions of workers, and educating the public. It may well be, as Bill Hendricks argues, that unions are “the single most important instrument that composition teachers and other workers have to effect social justice” (84). But it is also likely, as Hendricks observes, that even “[w]hen they are working right, faculty unions are a pain in the ass” (91). Unionizing of the academic workplace is in itself not the solution but rather the name given to a set of strategies that must themselves be continuously, laboriously, even painfully (re)worked in pursuing social justice.

Hendricks’ salutary acknowledgement of the concrete work of unions is all too often lost in arguments about unions, which tend to settle quickly for the language of the political rally: statements of personal belief; statements of utopian vision couched as demands; rhetorical questions. We learn, for instance, at the end of Christopher Carter’s chapter in Tenured Bosses that in his view the dignity of composition work “depends on the collective organization and mutual support of labor, not management” (191). Paul Lauter concludes “From Adelphi to Enron—and Back” with the stirring call, “What is necessary now . . . is a thorough-going critique of the damaging influence of corporate culture on higher education in America” (79). Ruth Kiefson ends her chapter with a series of demands aimed at building “a movement that can ultimately transform society” (149). However inspiring, such rhetoric necessarily begs all manner of questions about movement building, the use of critique, and how to engineer and recognize collective organization and the mutual support of labor. Instead, “collective organization,” “labor,” “mutual support,” “critique,” and “movement” are invoked as fetishes: “autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race” (Marx 164–65). The labor of creating (and revising, and re-creating, and revising) a movement, forms of mutual support, and critiques is thus elided, as is the need for the material conditions supporting engagement in such labor (for exceptions, see Jacobsohn, Tingle and Kirscht). And insofar as that labor is elided, its value is rendered nil, replaced by the exchange value of the commodity in the economy of more and less ethical statements. In place of critique, a movement, collective organization, and mutual support, or useful studies of what these might involve or have, we get “critique,” “movement,” “collective organization,” “mutual support.”
A series of posts on the WPA-Listserv in the summer of 2005 on the subject “Work load, vacation time, and course release” (originally “news alert”), and related postings on the same listserv on the subject “hours per week,” demonstrates the pervasiveness of many of these kinds of confusion about how to value the work of composition. While the series began as an alert about a PBS documentary on working conditions in colleges (Declining by Degrees), it quickly shifted to discussions of the number of hours per week academics spend working on average in comparison to the rewards they receive (and don’t) for that work, the forms of support for that work (such as summers “off” and course releases), and the “fairness” of these arrangements. While the postings included a number of useful references to studies on faculty workloads and thoughtful commentary on the nature, rewards, and problems of academic work, the terms of debate operating in the postings largely reiterated valuations of work in terms of hours spent and the “difficulty” of the work performed. Complaints about the injustice of inadequate compensation and unreal expectations for academic work (of being a WPA, an academic, a composition teacher) were met with admonishments about the injustice of inadequate compensation and working conditions for others and with acknowledgements that the reward that the pleasure of engaging in work that these workers find intellectually stimulating and ethically important compensates, to some extent, for the lack of financial rewards and status which that same work earns.

Some of the writers point to limitations in the arguments being made. For example, Deb Morton expresses concern that her acknowledgement that having a life where “thinking, intellectual conversation, learning, and service are valued” works as “a trade off” of sorts could be used “to justify why academics SHOULD work more hours than others.” Marcy Bauman, after questioning the number of hours academics might realistically be working or expected to work, warns that this focus on hours worked is itself deleterious. As she explains,

We’ve got to be *realistic* about what we do. I think there’s a mythology floating around that says that we have to justify our jobs by saying that we put in really long hours—partly to counter the prevailing winds in our culture that say that teachers have it easy. But if we keep saying, “No we don’t; we work really long hours and
produce produce produce!" we contribute to another myth—the one that says that pre-tenure people can be expected to work long hours, be incredibly prolific researchers, and excellent teachers to boot. We are participating in, and perpetuating, the very conditions that make our lives crazy. (Bauman)

Bauman subsequently suggests that teaching is hard work not because of the hours it takes but because of the inherent difficulty of teaching. Understandably following conventions of the genre of listserv postings, Bauman does not explain what makes such work more (or less) difficult than other kinds of work. But in any event, any attempt to explain what makes teaching distinctively difficult would be futile; in such discourse, “difficulty” represents a stand-in for “meritorious” and serves as an attribute attached to the activity of teaching as commodity, removed from the contingencies of concrete labor practices. (Teaching, after all, even teaching writing, can also be “easy.” It depends on what’s meant by teaching and the conditions in which the teaching occurs: who’s teaching what—what’s meant by “writing,” for example—to whom under what conditions—when, where, why, and with what resources). In the dominant discourse of work and value, work is valued because it is “hard”—somehow requiring extra effort (in the form of training, genius, hours)—or because it produces greater goods. It is within and according to that discourse—the discourse of meritocracy and free market ideology—that CEO’s are said to “earn” (that is, merit) more than their employees, “hard” workers more than slackers, celebrities more than unknown amateurs. While what is recognized as “difficult” and “good” is largely, if not wholly, contingent on dominant interests, appeals for recognizing the goodness and difficulty of work that does not conform to those interests allows the ideological character of any such recognition to go unchallenged. Thus, complaints about the culture’s failure to recognize the goodness and difficulty of composition work ultimately appear closer to laments about the nature of things than challenges to what just seems natural.

I have been arguing that discourse within composition studies about the value of work in composition has colluded in the debasement of both WPA work and the work of teaching composition in the terms by which that work is claimed to have value. Invocations of the “intellectual”
character of WPA work (or, for that matter, the work of teaching composition), its production of “skills,” its difficulty (by whatever measure), or the injustice of the treatment its workers endure treat the work of composition as a commodity even in the attention it gives to the “workers.” It does so by accepting a linear model of production that begins with the workers and proceeds to the consumption of the product of their work: here, the students, the schools, and society. That model occludes the full material social process of production. In that process, social relations constitute a productive force, and consumption of the “product” of the work of composition, rather than occurring after its production, is present in the production process from the “start.”

While negotiations for the improvement of working conditions for composition may make small gains within the terms of such discourse, they are equally likely to lead to further debasement of that work: for example, demands for greater efficiency (through outsourcing), more accountability, evidence of more “satisfied” student “consumers,” competition for even cheaper labor (“what the market will bear”). This is not to deny the concrete use values to be realized in particular circumstances from heralding the exchange value within certain economies (in terms of institutional efficiencies, student satisfaction, and the like) of particular changes to working conditions (lower class sizes, better pay and job security for adjuncts, course releases for curriculum development) for the production of particular commodities (writing skills, tuition revenue). Good things can and often do happen when small groups of students led by trained, dedicated, and well-paid instructors are afforded sufficient time and other resources to engage seriously in projects of writing, reading, reflection, and rewriting, often despite the claims made about the value of such work. I am arguing, however, that different projects can be pursued, and different values can be accorded those projects, that are more in keeping with what we know about writing and reading as material social practices, and thus ultimately are more integral to our identities as teachers of composition and more justifiable to the students with whom we work, than the terms in which the value of work in composition is so often defined. Redefining the work of composition in a way that acknowledged that work as an activity that involves all its participants (students as well as teachers, WPAs, and untold others) working both within and
on the social through what and how they write, reflect on their writing, and revise would be a step toward a more accurate, just, and intellectually honest assessment of its real and potential value.

University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

Works Cited


Lauter, Paul. “From Adelphi to Enron—And Back.” Bousquet et al. 72–82.


Tingle, Nicholas, and Judy Kirscht. "A Place to Stand: The Role of Unions in the Development of Writing Programs." Schell and Stock 218–32.

Trimbur, John. "Literacy and the Discourse of Crisis." Trimbur and Bullock 277–95.


Vaughn, William. "I Was an Adjunct Administrator." Bousquet et al. 165–70.

"Work load, vacation time, and course release (was news alert)." WPA Listserv thread. http://lists.asu.edu/archives/wpa-l.html. (June 2005).