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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor:

I write this letter in part to reach out to workers in academe who may think, because they work in small, non-elite institutions, that the national movements toward equity for graduate students, part-time, and temporary faculty will not reach them. I also write to inform those who do work at the elite institutions that we hear and support your activities "on the frontlines," even if we are not sure how to join with you. What follows is the story of how one English department at a small state university exposed what had been its invisible and seamless power structure, and the resulting problems the department faces as a result.

We generally have two graduate teaching assistants in a department of 23 tenure-track and 8 full-time temporary faculty. In the spring 1999 semester, we offered 64 sections of composition, not including 2 sections of honors composition which are always taught by tenure-track faculty. Under our semester system, new this academic year, tenure-track faculty teach a heavy 4/4 load that includes teaching one or two sections of composition each semester, but still cannot teach all the required freshman composition and sophomore literature courses. I'm sure this is the typical situation at many small and midsize universities that creates so many non-tenure positions. That's where I come in.

I began working here in the 1997-98 academic year, the final year of Georgia's quarter system. Under that system the department functioned, or so it seemed, without reference to occupational difference or status--from what I gathered, it had always done so. Both tenure-track and full-time, temporary faculty (there were 7 of us then) taught 3 courses per quarter, served on committees, and advised undergraduates. Collegiality was the code of the day, but it was soon to be tested by the transformation to the semester system. The new 4/4 teaching load for tenure-track faculty meant a reduction from 9 to 8 courses. Someone had to take up the slack.

The then full-time, temporary faculty were notified, just before Spring Break (which seemed to us to be timed to create a cooling-off period and to prevent resistance), that we would be offered contracts for the next year, but that we would have to teach a 5/5 load. There were different reactions to the news, varying from resignation to indignation--I, for example, had taught five courses before when I worked part-time at two institutions, and hoped that I could do it again and still finish my dissertation. Another temp, who already had her PhD, wasted no time in organizing us into a group, in the hopes that we could convince "our bosses" of the illogic of asking anyone to teach 4 or 5 sections of composition. Almost immediately, the presence of a previously-unseen hierarchy in the department revealed itself, and things have never been the same.

Eventually we met with the Dean of Arts and Sciences, accompanied by our sympathetic department head and the director of composition, who cited research refuting the idea that so many sections of composition could be effectively taught by one person in a semester. We learned a useful lesson that day about the status of our work in the university and about the efforts that could be expended to short-circuit our

collective concern. Politely, we were told that there was nothing to be done for the 1998-99 year, that maybe something could be worked out in the future, and that we should not take our concerns any higher because neither the administration higher up, nor the tenure-track faculty in our own department would really care. In fact, if we just kept silent, perhaps the dean, in collusion with the department head could arrange our schedules so that at least those of us at the ABD stage and beyond would be relieved of one or two sections of composition each semester, making up the required time with sophomore literature, remedial English, or a 2-credit interdisciplinary course. In effect, there could be deals made under the table for each of us as individuals. As a group, no promises could be made.

We did not formally accept such a compromise, as it clearly would put us in a position of intentionally conspiring to violate our contracts, which require us to teach 15 hours. But the deals appear each semester and now we check each other's schedules to see who has the best one, to see who has the best connections--clearly this was a desired outcome meant to break down our solidarity. In addition, we were relieved of advising and of serving on committees, although we may volunteer to serve, but are not to be asked to do anything outside of the meetings. Does anyone really think we feel like the colleagues of the tenure-track faculty now? There is an unmistakable tension at all departmental functions, now; there are whispered conversations; there is the paranoia that accompanies our consciousness of class division. Where do we go from here? Well, *go* appears to be the operative word.

One temp simply quit, one with an MA went away to pursue a PhD, and three of us who did return and are teaching the 5/5 load have been trying to get our own tenure-track jobs--but there's no need to go over the job-market woes here. What I want, finally, to say is that this has been a good thing. There was probably always a hierarchy in the department in the minds of some of the faculty; now there are clear class distinctions, including a new consciousness of the wage disparity, that must be confronted. This department needs to decide whether to reinforce those lines or work to change them--either through increased hiring or departmental restructuring. A portion of the faculty (notice how I don't really put myself in that group anymore) is painfully concerned about the situation, because if it continues they will be faced with a constant turnover of temporary and burned-out workers. But there are also those who just wish we would go away or accept our lot gratefully, because as we all know there are armies of unemployed waiting to take our places, willing to be overworked on the way to a better position. I wish the department well.

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