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### **Interview with Karen Thompson**

*The following interview took place at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in April 1999. It has been edited for clarity.*

**TS:** In your 1992 article in *Academe* you pointed to the expansion of administrators' spheres of influence as a major factor in the continued exploitation of part-time faculty and the erosion of the faculty role in higher education. Have you seen any changes or positive trends in the academy in this area over the past five or six years, or has the power of administrators continued to increase?

**KT:** My general feeling from anecdotal experience and just thinking about it is that the situation has gotten worse. I have referred on several occasions to the Shamrock model of Charles Handy, a vision of the future of higher education in which he sees one leaf as the full-time permanent staff who are administrators and another leaf as the "experts," the faculty who are brought in occasionally to do various kinds of curricular work or teaching, and the third leaf as the contingent workers who are totally seasonal and marginal and so forth. This should sound very familiar to us. I think in my article I jokingly said that maybe the stem could be the graduate students who would feed into all three of these leaves [laughter], but I was just being facetious. The thing is that I thought that Charles Handy's idea at the time was spine chilling because it really seemed like it was a dangerous future, but it is a scenario that is becoming more and more the reality. In fact, a number of voices seem to be actually calling for that kind of structure, and I would say that Richard Miller's position, his concept of the intellectual bureaucrat, does sort of fit this model. I have said this to Richard. I find the idea that faculty and administrators should conflate in some way and be the permanent core of the university, whose job would be managing the other employees and tiers--the other people like you and me, graduate student employees and part-time faculty--really frightening because it totally redefines and compromises faculty and the profession.

The idea that you originally asked me about was whether we are seeing increasing numbers of administrators and I would say yes, and probably more and more of them are teaching a course or two on the side, at least we have that at Rutgers; so that the idea of the faculty administrator is a deformed one, and the line between those two sectors isn't so sharply drawn. At the same time you see faculty senates and faculty councils becoming more and more moribund; there is usually less reality to the concept of faculty governance, which is another kind of undermining of the profession that occurs and leads to growing numbers of part-time faculty and people are saying this more and more. So generally our institutions are becoming more administration dominated.

**TS:** Can you talk some about how the exploitation of part-time and graduate labor impacts the overall quality of instruction?

**KT:** I tried to put some of these issues in this context to the New Jersey legislature recently. I think that this is one of the primary things we have to be doing in order to make our case to legislatures, to the public

in general, to all kinds of constituencies, because it becomes increasingly clear that social justice or morality arguments do not work. Even people like Cary Nelson, for whom I have great respect, too often fall into that trap of making the moral argument. People simply are not moved by the moral argument. They are moved by self-interest arguments, economic arguments, and perhaps the education argument, but in our society even the education argument seems to come down to dollars and cents. People want you to put it into a consumer framework and see if they are getting their money's worth. That is what I was trying to do when I was talking to the legislature. They have been cutting money for higher education, and you are not going to get more money by saying we are exploited; they just aren't going to hear that. So I tried to emphasize things like the need for accessible faculty. Obviously, if a member of faculty isn't full time and committed to the institution, they are distracted, either by their studies if they are a graduate student, or by their other employment, which you have to have just to survive if you are a part-time faculty member. So whether you are employed full or part-time somewhere else, you are generally distracted from teaching as a main occupation. I would even argue that compensation is an issue that affects the students directly because if you don't get paid enough in your part-time teaching job, then you have to go elsewhere for income. I think administrators like to count on your being married to someone who can support you. Increasingly, however, you can't count on that because very few people like to live off of their partner's or spouse's income. At any rate the situation is not fair to students. No matter how devoted, no matter how committed, no matter how expert you are, these outside factors distract you. You are physically and temporally away from the university, so you have less time to do conferencing, advising, independent studies or any of those things--which we don't get paid for anyway so why should we do them?

**TS:** When I was an adjunct in Atlanta, in addition to teaching I worked at UPS unloading trucks from twenty to twenty five hours a week. I also got a library job at Emory where I worked an evening shift. I know a lot of people who work in libraries and bookstores in addition to teaching.

**KT:** UPS is a common one. It is funny because UPS is a place where we can learn a lot. I wrote a paper in which I showed what faculty could learn from the UPS strike. I think there are a lot of parallels. One is the importance of them making the part-time issue central to their strike. The full timers did that, not the part timers. There are also other issues that I don't think we can do much about. UPS drivers are very close to their clientele. Maybe this relates to how we relate with our students. UPS drivers wear the brown uniforms and drive the brown trucks. Everyone knows who they are, counts on them and has a good feeling about them doing their jobs well and serving them and everything. I don't think that faculty members have that image. On the contrary, people seem to think of us as lazy and overpaid, and this really causes us problems.

**TS:** There is one issue that I want to make sure we get to, and I think it relates to what you just said. At UPS you did have full-time people willing to go to bat for part timers. That alliance is crucial. However, I think that full-time people benefit, or at least feel that they benefit, from part-time labor. What kind of arguments can we make to compel them toward solidarity when they benefit materially from the situation as it exists?

**KT:** I don't think they do benefit materially from the situation as it exists. In fact, we are now seeing the results that any reserve labor force brings--all salaries shrink. We're seeing tenure-track salaries decline because of this very low tier. Faculty think they benefit materially because they think the pie is static, and everything we get comes from their share. They see it as a trade off. If the pie is static, then when we get more they get less. But that is not a good way to look at it, and that is why I went to the legislature. You need to get the pie bigger, from federal and state funding, from allocations within school budgets. Schools put money in lots of places other than instructional salaries. We need to get that pie bigger.

Then there is the question of the erosion of full-time lines. The larger the percentage of classes that are taught by part-timers the less full-time positions that are available. You have to be far-sighted, to be

willing to look at the big picture. Many people are not. They are only interested in their own salary, their own position, their own retirement and are not worried about the fact that there were 85 full-time faculty positions in the English department ten years ago, and now there are only 65, and ten years from now there might only be 45. They don't want to see the broader implications. I would say that of course there should be more full-time jobs and fewer part-time jobs and the way to do that is to pay part timers enough that there is no longer an economic incentive for schools to rely on part-time labor. But people don't see that because they have this false idea about the pie: if they get more money then we get less. The other thing is the tier structure: you feel better if there is a tier under you. But they should be worried about the profession and how much of it is sliding into that lower tier. They are looking at it as though "I am up here and you are down there and that's the way I want it because that makes me feel secure." That is a short-sighted viewpoint because more and more people are on the bottom tier.

**TS:** And being on the bottom tier inevitably affects the quality of our work. Most graduate students and adjuncts have office space, if at all, in basements or large, open classrooms. Our space is very public, and when students come to visit, our workspace affects their perceptions of us. For younger, inexperienced teachers, authority in the classroom is often already a problem and students seeing their "offices," and, of course, immediately understanding their places in the academic hierarchy, only makes things worse. The other obvious issue concerning workspace is the quality of time you are able to spend with students because you just don't have quality, reasonably private space for interaction.

**KT:** I agree and another thing is that poor working conditions thwart your ability to inspire students to the profession. Do our situations encourage our students to become teachers? Why would anyone want to become a teacher after they find out that after twenty years I am still getting 3000 dollars a course, and I have this crummy office like you describe. Nobody asks me what I think about how the program should be run. Why would anyone want to choose this profession? This is the image of higher education that we are presenting. It turns talented students away even more than the money of industry might lure them--especially the bright students. It used to be, twenty or thirty years ago, that becoming a teacher at least brought you respect, and I think that in some ways that is still the case, and it is one of the reasons that part-time faculty do this thing. College teaching no longer generates the respect it once did, yet respect or prestige seems to be one of the reasons people do it.

At a workshop for part-time lecturers yesterday, we discussed two problems that seemed to be two sides of the same coin. One problem was the willingness of adjuncts to teach for free or to teach under these conditions--without an office, benefits or a voice. Yet there remains a vestige of respect in the discipline, specifically the autonomy that comes with the work. There are still some attractions to being a teacher--having that autonomy and flexibility. People may teach part time because it gives them the flexibility to raise children or write poetry or whatever, but I still focus on the willingness of people to do this kind of work for little or no compensation. It is almost like a volunteer job, or the Peace Corps or something like that. But here is the thing, the underside of this willingness to volunteer your labor is the concept of "passing." Part timers and perhaps graduate students really like the feeling of being perceived as professors. This is a problem because if we are going to make the public more aware of the problems we face and how they impact education we have got to be open, honest and up-front about what is going on. So I tell my students. But a lot of people don't want to tell their students because it drops the facade and they are not passing as professors anymore.

**TS:** I would like to ask you about the issue of disciplinary status in English departments and how it affects efforts to organize. While most "English" classes taught in most departments are actually writing classes taught by graduate students and part-time lecturers, I believe that there continues to be a pervasive belief among literature faculty that the teaching of composition is intellectually beneath them. So what you end up with in many universities is an upper-echelon of tenured faculty who teach literature--a minority of the sections offered by English departments--and a lower echelon of part-time faculty and graduate students

who teach composition classes, the bread and butter of most departments. Do you think that this split in the division of labor contributes to the willingness of tenured English faculty to relegate the teaching of these classes to an underpaid and invisible workforce?

**KT:** That is a tough one. There are some people who are proposing that exact structure: that all you need is a Masters to teach composition and you should establish a clear structural difference between PhDs for the scholar-teacher, for the administrator teacher, the WPA person who manages the employment of this lower level of people who only teach and only need a masters. In practice, I don't have a problem with that, but in theory there is a difficulty because it plays right into that Shamrock model that I talked about earlier. You have a growing pyramid in which administrators hold the power at the top and the base is comprised of larger numbers of temporary staff who have very little, if any, security or voice in the department. I don't think this is a good model of education. I don't think it serves students.

**TS:** I am going to read a quote from Cary Nelson's "Lessons from the Job Wars: What is to be done?" (1995): "Although I have taught composition and enjoyed it, I would now find it demoralizing and intolerable to have to grade hundreds of composition papers each semester. There is no way I could do it as carefully and thoroughly as my graduate students do. So what is to be done?" Similarly, Paul Lauter in *Canons and Contexts* doesn't discuss the role of composition in English studies, and I don't believe he cites any composition scholarship in the entire book. Nelson clearly denigrates composition, and I wonder where those of us who study and teach composition fit into Lauter's academic picture. Because many of the issues of academic labor in English classes concern the people who are teaching writing classes, I worry that the lack of conversations between people who do composition and those who do literature could undermine any realistic effort at unity. I wonder what our ideal university looks like in terms of the role of people who do work in composition. In the model you describe, I see a fairly clear disciplinary hierarchy with composition on the bottom, and I haven't heard any workplace activists address this.

**KT:** There are a number of strands there that I think I could pick up on. You are right to point to this problem, and I think it is very important. The chair of my department recently told me that what she does in the classroom is very different from what I do. Well of course: she teaches literary criticism and I teach writing. Of course it is different, but is her course more valuable? There is a very big discussion going on now about the value of teaching literature and about English departments and their budgets, and the humanities generally shrinking. And of course writing courses are service courses: they support the whole university, all the disciplines, everybody has to know how to write. This could be a unifying feature, rather than a divisive one.

**TS:** I think that a part of the problem is that "high intellectual work" is still commonly seen as literary humanities intellectual work, and low work is teaching writing, which is considered a "skill," or teaching generally. This is what occasionally makes me really uncomfortable with a lot of the discussions of academic workplace issues. I see those elitist values reproduced in the activist rhetoric, and I wonder how much unity or change is possible when the professional attitudes that form the hierarchies that create these inequities are so deeply entrenched.

**KT:** I don't know, but let's face it, we are seeing a decline in the study of literature. It is already happening in terms of the ways in which departments are merging and re-dividing and shifting. Compositionists are trying to create a discipline at a time when disciplines are declining. The unifying issues become the value of education and the democratic process.

Going back to the question of perceptions of the teaching of writing, I think you are right that it might be an obstacle--the division between full-time and part-time faculty. But I think there are ways to deal with that. We have to be very innovative here, we aren't going to be able to change things just by convincing

people that they are wrong. Part of the innovation will be labor oriented in terms of creating new types of positions and creating new relationships with our work. The other part will be pedagogical: designing new types of courses. I think maybe we will have to re-imagine freshman English or Composition. Some schools have experimented with this, making freshman English more interdisciplinary. At Rutgers there are courses that are tied to subjects--content courses in which you are encouraged to write, perhaps in your major. You can also do it in connection with another course you are taking; in other words the writing teacher teaches a course in conjunction with a teacher from another discipline. In an effort to make teaching writing more attractive to senior faculty, some schools have created courses which are team taught. So part of this is doing more innovative things--not seeing the teaching of writing as a grind, but innovating in the classroom, which is what we need anyway. The idea of undergraduate seminars are also becoming more and more popular. Composition can be like an undergraduate seminar and thus be interesting and valuable for students and faculty. Anyway, the important thing is for us to have something to say about the way universities are being redefined instead of just having it happen to us.

**TS:** I think that what you are saying is very important--redefining the ways that we see our roles and maybe redefining the structure of universities.

**KT:** Exactly, the structures are going to be redefined if for no other reason than technology. In New Jersey we have the virtual university of New Jersey. Everybody is talking about the University of Phoenix and how they are moving across the country with their on-line program, even though we have delayed their entrance into NJ. It is just a matter of time. There will be a global educational sphere, just like the global economy. It is a horrifying idea, but it is very possible that you will have composition rooted at a particular university that is run by education bureaucrats, with the papers sent to Asia and graded by highly educated English-speaking people who do not require very much pay. It won't be very different from moving our factories off-shore. It is a horrifying thought, but we have to think and talk about it. We have to try to enter the arenas where change is occurring.

**TS:** Do you know of any recent examples of success stories?

**KT:** Well the positives are the organizing initiatives and there I have to refer to graduate students because the largest sector of organizing that is going on is happening among graduate students. Most recently in California and Michigan, and there are other places that haven't gotten as much press: Iowa and Kansas for instance. I don't know too many stories about part-time faculty organizing. Their situation is much more difficult because they have more to risk. They feel more vulnerable and insecure and all of those kinds of things. The most recent success story that I know of is at the University of Alaska. The part-time faculty just recently negotiated their own contract. More hopeful are some regional organizing projects involving part-time and adjunct faculty that the AAUP is participating in. There are ways to have success without collective bargaining in less formal ways, such as establishing communication lines at your campus, going to your university senate, getting people together through newsletters and petitions, putting pressure on administrators to do the right thing in specific instances. In the last five or ten years the AAUP has made enormous strides in terms of sending out statements, creating and organizing initiatives. Now there is talk of regional organizing projects, perhaps at first in a Boston coalition. That is a whole other interesting debate about whether regional rather than institutional organizing is the way to go. Those kinds of initiatives are very encouraging. California is very often a bellwether of these kinds of things. What is happening there is also very encouraging. The successes of graduate students recently, like at UCLA, has spread throughout the UC system. There is also an umbrella organization, CPFA (California Part-time Faculty Association) that is doing important organizing and legislative work. The unions in higher education in California seem to be very well organized and on the move and they are doing more legislative work. In Washington State there are also some legislative initiatives. I think there is a current organizing drive in Oregon. In general, the West coast seems to be very active. So you have to look to those people. The faculty do need to organize, and some faculty are organizing.

For example, even though I have a number of obstacles in the New Jersey state law, I would still like to do something legislatively that parallels what I see going on in California. So there are a number of areas in which people can work. They can work locally in their departments and institutions and even in their classrooms--ranging from things like collective bargaining to discussing these issues with your students in the classroom. And then there are some other regional projects like what is going on in Boston, and the national work that is going on is also very encouraging because you know that the graduate student caucus in MLA has pushed the MLA to at least say they are going to do some things, like data gathering. We are still waiting for them to do something. I think it might be difficult to actually get them to do what they said they are going to do. Compiling data and distributing data will be very important. Here at CCCC's [The Conference on College Composition and Communication] we are going to have this rally Friday night where we are going to get input from members on these issues, and we do have this task force I am going to be chairing with Eileen Schell which is very encouraging, because we have had statements for the last 10 to 15 years, and I think we are all tired of just making statements. Hopefully, the task force will help us to move things forward in a practical way. Maybe the NCTE will also be able to collect some data and distribute it. Encouraging more publication on these topics would be a good thing. I know there is a book coming out edited by Eileen Shell and Patty Stock that is a collection of essays on improving the working conditions of part-time faculty in academia. I have an essay in there, so that is how I know about it. *Workplace* itself is an encouraging example. So, all of these things come together at the various different levels, from local to national.

**TS:** You have stressed the importance of reaching, and working with, people outside of the university: the public, parents, the legislators, etc. Why is this important, and what are the pragmatic steps we can take to reach them?

**KT:** The public, generally, is an important audience to reach. We often discuss what the best way is to reach the public and obviously it's the press. However, the press tends to gravitate toward the sensational, so whenever you get the press involved they want to do the horror stories. They want to talk about how horribly treated we are, and they don't really want to talk about what should be done. I think there are other ways to reach the public, but you have to really work on it. While the trend toward viewing education in terms of consumerism--viewing education as a product--is discouraging, we need to recognize it and find a way to make it work for us. We need to reach the parents and students as consumers, and I am not sure how to do that. I have had discussions with people about getting more material to guidance counselors in the high schools and to admissions officers in the colleges and universities, and to the alumni associations and to various organizations that might speak to parents in a different way. I know that I was struck recently when I was on a panel with an administrator who was an admissions officer who said that parents are inquiring now about how many graduate students and part time instructors their children will face. So, we need to somehow make use of those inquiries. I mean we don't want to fall into the trap of denigrating the work of part-time and graduate faculty; that is an easy trap to fall into. I nevertheless think that we can find ways to make these inquiries work for us.

What it takes is what it always takes: initiative and persistence.

*Tony Scott, The University of Louisville*