Hardly Working: The Labor Concerns of Graduate Student Assistants in Writing Programs

Lily Victoria Howard-Hill

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HARDLY WORKING: THE LABOR CONCERNS OF GRADUATE STUDENT ASSISTANTS IN WRITING PROGRAMS

by

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DEDICATION

For my grandparents, who made sure I always knew my worth; and to the graduate student workers, contingent faculty, adjuncts, and other marginalized employees of higher education who continue to take up the call.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation could not have been completed without the help of my committee, and the invaluable support and guidance of my director, Dr. Kevin Brock. Thank you for reminding me of what is important, and encouraging me to take a break when needed. I must also thank my friends and fellow graduate student assistants at the University of South Carolina for being fantastic sounding boards as this dissertation took shape, and for helping me see what I was overlooking. To my family, thank you for always making my day a little brighter and encouraging me to keep pushing on when I wanted to quit. To my father, thank you for showing me the value of hard work, dedication, and for teaching me that when something isn’t working, take a step back and breathe. To my mother, especially, for the endless laughter and moral support. To the whole Green family for their faith in me and to Rodney Green — when I was told that I “wasn’t cut out for further graduate study”, I agreed. You didn’t. Your unwavering loyalty, support, and endless capacity for grace and understanding lifted me up. None of this was possible without any of you.
ABSTRACT

The instructors of undergraduate writing courses are very often graduate students who exist in a space between student and teacher, subsequently shouldering a dual burden of responsibility. This is particularly the case in freshman writing and composition classes. Graduate students that hold assistantships and work in writing programs have a number of concerns related to their academic labor, specifically the benefits and compensation they receive in exchange for their work. To further illustrate these issues, this project offers the results of an IRB-approved study that highlights the tight connection between graduate student assistants’ working conditions, the financial and material benefits they receive as graduate student assistants, and the effects of capitalism on the structures and practices of higher education. Three key areas of discussion emerge: that graduate student assistants are not fairly compensated for the labor they do, the material benefits offered to graduate student assistants leads to levels of dissatisfaction with the grad school experience, and departments offer few resources for managing the emotional labor inherent to the roles graduate student assistants hold. The results speak to wider issues of academic labor in higher education, highlighting their relevance as a microcosm of ongoing national trends, and proposing solutions for addressing and mitigating these trends.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

At the end of October 2020, at what we thought was the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the stifling anxiety that was so pervasive in the build up to the November presidential election, I was taking a grad class on current scholarship in composition studies. We were meeting via Zoom, once a week for a few hours, some of us in our offices, some of us in our homes. The majority of my peers were teaching online, but a select few — myself included — had braved teaching in person. For all of us, I believe, the challenges were the same. But we were almost there — we’d made it more than half way through the semester, staring down the barrel of finals, and grading, and seminar papers.

In this particular class meeting, our professor asked what I’m sure was thought to be an easy question: he asked us how we were doing. In the silence that followed, the weight of everything that was happening socially, politically, emotionally, sat motionless. Eventually, myself and one of my closest peers broke the silence, and the floodgates opened. One after the other, this class full of grad students shared what I’m sure was only a fraction of the anxieties we were experiencing. Our students weren’t where we wanted them to be. We were overwhelmed with the demands of our own studies, trying to balance our commitment to teaching with succeeding as graduate students. The emotional
demands of our role seemed insurmountable, and we were poor, tired, and hopeless. Our professor, when the well of confession had run dry, said, “But you chose this. You knew what you were getting into.” The implication being, of course, that because we had made a choice to be graduate students, all of the stress was par for the course. Not that it was deserved, as such, but simply a byproduct of the circumstances we had all voluntarily committed to. And none of this is to paint such a picture of despondency that one could argue that it was a failing on the part of our program, or that this particular group of graduate students just wasn’t cut out to thrive in these particularly challenging circumstances.

Instead, it is to say that the precarious nature of graduate student labor is such that graduate programs often forget that the community viewed by administrations and wider institution bodies as cheap labor are still also students. We are navigating a set of bureaucracies that are trying to force us into boxes, at the same time navigating emergent identities as both scholars and educators (McIntyre 4). Many of us are working to support ourselves and/or our families, struggling with the constraints placed upon us by the very departments that we serve. Much of our work is invisible, on one hand because a lot of it takes place outside of the institution, and on the other, because there is not always something to show for it.

An examination of labor in writing programs has perhaps never been more relevant as it is currently, when critical pedagogy asks students to examine their own situatedness in the classroom, challenging power dynamics in the name of equity, and encouraging a collaborative negotiation of structures to enact social change. As
intellectual rigors like critical race theory come under fire for promoting anti-racist practices in the classroom (amongst other perceived sins), graduate student attempts to address labor concerns through unionization also address larger issues that impact the communities in which they live and work — a strategy often called “social justice unionism” (Peterson 100). With its focus on communication and engaging with a broad range of voices, composition studies seems to be in a prime position to be at the forefront of these conversations. As DeJoy claims, “we should begin from the belief that composition studies is capable of opening spaces for all members of the writing classes to participate in and contribute to the discourses that define their material realities as members of those classes” (148). The cultural moment in which America finds itself requires a response that composition-rhetoric is uniquely equipped to give, in using language and knowledge-making to ensure that under-heard voices are no longer pushed to the boundaries of the conversation. In this way, the history of composition studies seems to have come full circle, albeit with new considerations existing at the center of the conversation.

1.1 Brief Historical Background

Before the mid-19th Century, ‘writing instruction’ focused on penmanship and transcription, asking students at all levels to become better writers simply by copying the work of established scholars. As Woods (1985) explored in his extensive history of pre-20th Century composition, the teaching of composition, as distinct from handwriting, began with a series of educational reforms in schooling during the 1830s. Before these reforms, the teaching of handwriting occurred in what aptly were termed grammar
schools that emphasized rote drill in the rules of Latinate grammar and spelling, as well as vocabulary and proper handwriting, particularly in the elementary and secondary levels of education. In the 1830s, attitudes towards writing shifted, not in small part thanks to the work of American reformers who encouraged students to think about writing about objects in their environments. Schultz’s (1999) elongation of Woods’ history begins with the introduction of composition in the 1830s as part of the “Great Awakening” in education and the move towards universal primary education. Reformers argued against beginning with prescriptive rules for writing, and advocated for learning to write by writing, not strictly following models but using models in more complex ways. Students began to develop their own subject matter and even write journals, drawn from their own lived experiences (Schultz 159). As textbooks gradually moved towards more concrete and practical methods in writing, students got regular practice in composition, not just memorization or dictation of adult texts.

The post-Civil War shift from rhetorical training grounded in classical rhetorical principles, to rhetorical training centered around writing, was followed by a push to use writing as a means of testing and sorting incoming college students, led primarily by the faculty of Harvard University. By the late-1880s, writing instruction was predominantly supported by textbooks and writing manuals, and focused on dividing writing into the separate modes of narration, description, exposition, and argument (Shepley 5). From the 1870s to the 1890s, classical and philosophical courses, once viewed as central requirements of higher education, expanded to include courses in other disciplines such as science and commerce. As a result, by the turn of the century, faculty who were vocal advocates for specialization and research had relegated the teaching of writing to a less
important skill. For Robert J. Connors, “the rhetoric teacher of 1900 is increasingly marginalized, overworked, and ill-paid. Instead of being a senior professor, he, or she, is an instructor or a graduate student” (108).

The late-nineteenth-century rise of specialization reflected broader social changes in that the American college “was to become an agent of upward social mobility” given new business and industry needs (Berlin 60). By the early twentieth century, many faculty members at elite research universities evaluated student writing based on its adherence to textbook rules, and grammar and punctuation conventions. The study of English itself and the proliferation of academic departments in the late 1800s and early 1900s illustrate the degree of change surrounding composition before the 1950s. Fowler and Fowler (1984) briefly discuss the history of the unfortunate split between composition and speech communication, which occurred just after the formation of the NCTE in 1911, but had roots in the 19th-century elocution movement. By the 1910s, “many state normal schools became degree-granting normal colleges, and by the 1920s public junior colleges were founded in the hope of giving working students more affordable and accessible higher education options” (Shepley 6). Because of the discipline’s new prominence post-1945, there have been ongoing discussions throughout the field about academic labor and the working conditions of writing program instructors. As a result of military conflicts in the 19th and 20th centuries, American higher education saw an influx of different populations of students. Many of them, Connors argues, needed to be “taught to write, needed to be taught correctness in writing, needed to know forms, and could be run through the system in great numbers” (9). The course we now know as freshman composition became an almost universal requirement very quickly, located by
historical accident in new disciplinary units called English Departments (McLeod 26). Freshman composition courses are no longer solely housed in departments of English — which in itself raises additional questions about how academic labor issues are addressed in other departments. Although academic labor research has emerged more recently as a multidisciplinary issue, what wasn’t discussed in the early establishment of first year writing programs were the ‘underclass’ of writing instructors: nontenured and contingent faculty, and graduate student laborers.

The departmental divide between the traditional literature-based programs of study and the field of rhetoric and composition, which itself had already split from speech communication fields, led to an increased questioning of within these programs, who was doing the teaching? Hiring practices focused on the oft-contested practice of ‘meeting student needs’. The historic dissonance between rhetoric and composition, and literature — the English Department’s identity crisis, if you will — resulted in "terrible overwork to which rhetoric teachers were subjected" and reinforced the idea that composition was “an apprenticeship to the ‘real’ work of literature” (Connors 115). While the use of graduate student labor wasn’t new, the emergence of rhetoric and composition as a field that served to equip its students with basic writing skills reaffirmed what had already become quite apparent: that English departments had a hierarchical structure, and “the teaching of rhetoric in college was detailed to the low ends of the scale, the hapless bottom-feeders: TAs and instructors” (Connors 115).

The “hapless bottom-feeders” is an interesting metaphor. It is interesting, if only because what the term brings to mind is not, in fact, the reality. In a very literal sense,
marine life bottom-feeders thrive at the bottom of the water source, consuming material from the bottom of the body of water. Metaphorically, the bottom-feeders of a marine ecosystem are less important, perhaps, than their mid- to high-feeding compatriots. To run with the fishing allegory for a moment, catching a bottom-feeding tilapia is a far less impressive feat than catching a blue fin tuna. What Connors is suggesting is that graduate teaching assistants and instructors — presumably to encompass adjuncts and temporary faculty — are considered less important, more inconsequential within the ecosystem of higher education. The problem is, as any marine biologist could tell you, all elements of an ecosystem have a role to play.

1.2 The Hapless Bottom-Feeders: An Overview of Graduate Student Labor

Graduate student labor emerged in the form of a traditional apprenticeship. At my own institution, for example, in the first year of my Master’s program, half of my cohort spent the Fall semester in the University Writing Center; the other half worked as Graduate Instructional Assistants leading discussion sections of higher level lectures. In the Spring, we switched. This single semester of leading discussion was supposed to prepare us for becoming instructors of record in the second year of our degrees — a promotion, of sorts, that came with greater financial benefits. I am sure that the experiences of my fellow cohort members in their GIA positions varied greatly. Mine felt like a baptism by fire. Myself and two of my peers were assigned to a lecture on Themes in American Literature; the professor, an esteemed scholar with tenure and a list of accolades, lectured once a week, and the three of us led two discussion sections each. With no real teaching experience to speak of, no experience of planning lessons or grading or even leading discussion, the professor — the instructor of record — gave us
free rein. The conditions were quite simple: base our discussions around the content of that week’s lecture. The three of us created our own grading schema. We planned our lessons together, using the collective might of three woefully underprepared hive minds. We modeled the teaching methods of the instructors of the graduate classes we were taking, hoping that at no point did we embarrass the lead professor, or equally, draw attention to his lack of oversight. There were no workshops that were offered by the department, no advice on how long to spend on grading and preparation. In retrospect, this semester of trying to float in concrete shoes did create an environment in which I felt comfortable moving to my position as the instructor of record in subsequent semesters, but the stress of feeling like there was nobody to guide us to that point due to the internal power structures and my own tenuous position as a new graduate student was a learning experience I had not quite anticipated.

How best to prepare graduate student teaching assistants has been the subject of a wide range of research\(^1\). The majority of the extant scholarship posits that teaching assistant training should at least cover the basic tenets of higher education classrooms: grading, lesson planning, leading discussion, and interacting with students to whom there is the highest responsibility. Some of the research is specific to disciplines or labs, discussion groups, and tutorials – the common domains of graduate student teaching assistant supervision. The delivery of this information, if in fact it is delivered at all, departments typically hold orientations and workshops intended to address some of the professional development needs of their graduate student instructors, but this preparation is often focused on the content of a course or program

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\(^1\) For more scholarship on the TA training process, see: Austin, 2002a; Austin, 2002b; Nyquist et al, 1999.
To provide this information to TAs, departments typically hold orientations and meetings that address some of the professional development needs of their graduate students, including preparation on how to fulfill their TA role. In examining this professional development preparation it is evident that departmental preparation is usually content-focused and often does not address the practical, pedagogical issues that may arise.

What my first semester of teaching should have been is a classic example of the apprenticeship model of graduate instructor training, where a graduate student assists a course supervisor and the course supervisor is responsible for preparing and guiding the graduate teaching assistant in their work. This is still the model favored by many institutions — the emphasis on learning by doing is seen as hugely beneficial to the development of professional identity, but in practice, “[the apprenticeship model] negates the TA role as a stand-alone job, promotes the idea that faculty do not need to have preparation in order to teach, and that teaching is a compilation of skills attained in pieces as a TA” (Korpan 4). To further illustrate how the apprenticeship could, or perhaps should, work: my brother has recently started his training as a painter and decorator. He has very little experience, aside from helping with home improvement under the guidance of my parents. His training is two-fold; some days he is in a classroom-based learning environment, listening to qualified and experienced painters and decorators explore different aspects of the job, from customer service skills, to business management, and the practicalities of working as a painter and decorator. The other days, the students on this program are in guided instruction in simulated workplace environments, honing their practical skills with the tools of their intended trade.
If graduate teaching assistant training operated more like this, it would not increase — at the very least, not to the same extent — the demand on graduate student labor by expecting them to perform duties for which they have often had little to no preparation, and for which they are frequently not supported. Fuller (2006) argues that successful apprenticeships need to have both formal education and on-the-job experience. Fuller backs up this claim by citing research that has shown that effective apprenticeships combine a structured period of off-the-job learning in formal education settings with on-the-job training and experience (234). Graduate students are relegated to passive learning through the acts of other, more experienced instructors. But, as we have seen, reading about best pedagogical practices in journals or textbooks does not equate to implementing those best practices, particularly when there is little to no oversight. The apprenticeship model of TA training encourages “instructors [to] rely on the instructional forms of describe and demonstrate that is primarily oral and dependent on learning memory” (Korpan 5).

The risk of the apprenticeship model is that graduate student instructors, who are often promoted, beyond their first year of study, to instructors of record, lack the practical experience to manage the demands of writing instruction. If, as research has suggested, the experience gained as a graduate instructor is perhaps the most stable, field-related employment those holding English degrees may hold, the apprenticeship model simply cannot afford to proceed in such a way that those instructors choose to either not continue carrying the labor burden for writing programs, or perhaps to choose to not continue with their degrees at all. The implication underlying all of this, of course, is that pedagogical practices and student needs — both at the undergraduate and graduate levels — have not
changed at all in the last few hundred years, therefore the need to update the way
gradient student instructors are trained does not exist. This is simply not true. As Herman
and Schmidt argue, “The old apprenticeship model under which graduate students did
relatively small amounts of teaching and research as part of their professional training is
disconnected from current realities, and it cannot be mended by calls for collegiality or a
disdain for solutions that associate academic employees with blue-collar models” (12).
Mountford echoes that call, calling the apprenticeship model of graduate assistantships
“an inadequate form of professional training”, and suggesting that while intended to
“protect [graduate students] from the more difficult politics of the institution”, the
apprenticeship model does nothing to effectively prepare graduate students for careers in
higher education (49). The apprenticeship model of graduate education, Mountford
continues, is problematic because “the work of a GTA is work — not a kind of
apprenticeship for which universities can award poverty-level wages” (43). Mountford
isn’t wrong: the murky definitions of graduate students, built around the outdated
apprenticeship model as detailed above, are lying at the foundation of some of the current
issues and ongoing conversations surrounding academic labor.

But, while the apprenticeship model persists in many institutions even today, new
concerns have arisen around the role of graduate student labor. As industrial needs
changed throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, so too did the way the American
university functioned. No longer was the apprenticeship model, or ‘trickle down’ learning
the most effective way of meeting the demands of a changing job market. It is no longer
the case that the majority of graduate students in degree seeking programs will seek
teaching-oriented positions within higher education. Within the field of composition and rhetoric, for example, the rapid expansion of technical communication, professional writing, and expert writing positions within the non-profit sector, means that graduate student teaching assistants with classroom experience have a broader range of career trajectories to choose from. While greater choice is a good thing, the change in focus of writing programs from literature based study to more holistically applicable content — writing across curriculums, or writing in disciplines, for example — has not been accompanied by a change in how institutions prepare graduate student teaching assistants to deliver this material in a classroom setting. Recent PhD graduates in Rhetoric and Composition have faced the worst faculty job markets in recorded history, and the dramatic drop in tenure-track jobs — being the idealized post-graduate objective — cannot be ignored. We need to acknowledge that by concentrating on specialized research within the field, our doctoral programs are preparing graduates for jobs that many will not get. All graduate programs need to offer more opportunities for students to connect with nonacademic settings through alumni networks, internships, innovative courses, and research aimed at audiences beyond the academy. These doctoral program reforms are important for all students, including those who will become tenure-track, because the dramatic changes in higher education are not likely to end anytime soon, and the next generation of graduate faculty will need to be informed advocates for their students.

1.3 The Modern University: The Effects of Capitalist Economic Policies on Higher Education

Annie Mendenhall claims that in the later stages of the 20th century, English departments “entered an era of academic depression…marked by public criticism of
universities and the redirection of federal funding from universities to private
corporations and external institutions” (18). In addition to the seemingly endless choices
for a field of study, higher education most recently has especially been characterized by
the rise of for-profit education. Unlike most colleges, for-profits exist explicitly to make
money for their investors. Additionally, for-profit colleges are subject to corporate taxes
and regulatory bodies such as the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and
Federal Trade Commission (FTC), and receive little, if any, direct government support. In
contrast to their public and nonprofit counterparts, 90 percent of for-profit revenues come
from tuition and fees. This differs markedly from private nonprofit colleges, where tuition
makes up 29 percent of total revenue, and public universities, where it accounts for only
13 percent. These traditional schools derive the bulk of their revenue from federal or state
government subsidies, private gifts, auxiliary enterprises, and investment income. There
is an immense amount of evidence that for-profit colleges yield higher debts and poorer
labor market outcomes for students when compared to other forms of postsecondary
education. As an example, University of Phoenix was one of the pioneering for-profit
institutions, placing an emphasis on catering to adult learners, taking a business-oriented
approach to learning, and, later, developing an emphasis on online learning and distance
programs. The school is owned by Apollo Global Management, an American private-
equity firm; the leadership team at University of Phoenix is almost exclusively occupied
by people with degrees in business, business management, and economics (University of
Phoenix, “Leadership”).

2 See specifically: Cellini, Stephanie Riegg and Cory Koedel. “The Case For Limiting Federal
Student Aid to For-Profit Colleges”. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, vol. 36, 2017,
pp. 934-942.
With profit-driven schools, academic labor is faced with ‘unbundling’, a phenomenon that Kevin Kinser explains as “various components of the traditional faculty role (e.g., curriculum design) are divided among different entities, while others (e.g., research) are eliminated altogether”. The result is that faculty at University of Phoenix are hired solely on a contingent basis: about 97 percent of Phoenix instructors teach part-time, compared to 47 percent nationwide, earning approximately $1000-$2000 per course (Mangu-Ward). Kinser adds that “Faculty are hired primarily to facilitate student learning in a particular course, and their term of employment begins and ends with the five-week UOP semester” (13). Aside from the labor critiques leveled at University of Phoenix for relying on part-time and contingent faculty, with zero option of tenure or more permanent employment, perhaps one of the biggest problems with for-profit education is inherent to its design — that despite relatively high tuition costs, very little of those gains are spent on instruction or academic improvement. Education in this model is a cash cow, with significant portions of financial assets being used to subsidize intensive marketing for growth at high levels of profit for investors and owners (Hall).

In addition to the rise of for-profit education over the last fifty years, education has also faced the increased corporatization and commodification of public and private higher education, shifting the academy’s focus away from learning to cost-saving measures, subsequently leading to an exploitation of graduate student and contingent faculty labor and entrenching in academia a resistance to stipend increases or other financial benefits, that perhaps would already have been granted to more ‘traditional’ employees, such as “tenure-stream faculty [who] perform as little as 25% of all campus teaching” (Bousquet et al 1). In the capitalist university system, knowledge is no longer
the final product; rather, knowledge is generated as a commodity that is capitalized on in profit-oriented activities. Colleges and universities actively seek out “partnerships with corporations and industry, and they have redirected funds and added significant staff and administrators to support this activity” (Kezar 475), often to the detriment of university workers. In fact, Nicholson adds, “social criticism of universities, the corporatization of universities, and fiscal pressures did contribute to the conditions many English professors decried: a poor job market for tenure-track positions, the rise in the use of adjunct, part-time, and other temporary instructors, and an increasing reliance on graduate student labor” (126).

In their book *The Gig Academy* (2019), the rise of academic capitalism, for authors Adriana Kezar et al, has brought many systemic changes to universities, perhaps none more consequential than those imposed on the workers and relations of academic production. Building on the work of Slaughter and Rhoades in their book *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy*, Kezar et al more thoroughly define the titular institution of the gig academy, describing “the commercialization of research through the rise in patents and copyrights, the commodification of parts through contracts, trademarks and logos, the positioning of students as consumers, and the corporatization of management through accountability schemes” (14). The rise of the gig economy — most prominently illustrated in this book by ride-share services such as Uber — undermine both worker protections and privacy rights. For many who work in higher education, the gig economy and academic capitalism have observed several shifts in the values of the America university: labor outsourcing, the concept of ‘unbundling’, academic entrepreneurialism, administrative managers, the rise of technology as a means of
reducing labor costs, and structural discrimination. These shifts are key facets of the Gig Academy and a direct result of “the long-term restructuring toward cheap and disposable labor in higher education…[and] its relation to changes in the broader knowledge economy” (Kezar et al 19). In terms of the field of composition and rhetoric specifically, the gig economy has changed the nature of the employment that graduate students can hope to obtain. What Kezar at al refer to as the Gig Academy, Stanley Aronowitz calls vocationalization: “[it] has become a virus infecting the liberal arts undergraduate curriculum. In many institutions social science and humanities departments have been reduced to service departments for business and technical programs” (103).

For graduate students in composition and rhetoric programs, the gig academy has added an additional dimension to their graduate school experience. Universities have yet to integrate the study or practice of the Gig Economy into their curriculum or career services. Neoliberal economics and capitalism view education as a meritocracy to be commodified, one that should allow us all, on a level playing field, to succeed (O’Donnell 19). This is not the case, and the flaws with this view have been widely reported. Things such as access, cost, discrimination in all forms: these are just a handful of examples of such failings. Higher education institutions do not, in fact, create equal opportunities at all but, as Rachel O’Donnell suggests, “are mechanisms by which social inequalities are perpetuated” (20). The ability of bodies to do the work of both learning and teaching has a direct correlation to the current model of education. The profitably of the university is tied to the lack of adequate payment given to the majority of its workforce, who in turn are impaired by the structures that they work within. In the capitalist university system, profits are earned at the expense of workers themselves, and the reluctance of the
neoliberal institution to facilitate access to the resources that would better equip workers to do their jobs indicates a disinclination on the part of university administration to make significant changes. Instead, the prevailing nature of higher education insists on proliferating the idea that the sole purpose of a college degree is to prepare students to become full-time employees in full-time jobs. This approach is fatally flawed; even in the last few years since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen that industry is built on tenuous foundations, and when it is forced, admittedly unexpectedly, to adapt, seems to have no inherent flexibility. So, preparing students to take on roles in jobs that they may hold for a relatively long stretch of time — years as opposed to months, for example — immediately does students a disservice by leaving them unequipped to succeed as independent workers, or to be adaptable to the changing needs of their job sector.

1.4 Composition in Crisis: The Decline of Humanities

While internal and field-wide efforts continued to mitigate the exploitation of its disenfranchised workers, factors outside of their control threatened to halt any forward progress. After the financial collapse of 2008, universities faced “stepped-up austerity measures” (Welch and Scott 4) and while this fiscal emergency was nothing new to composition studies, or indeed English departments in general, “this new felt sense of crisis is different—in part because of the scale and pace of the changes and in part because...composition ha[s] served as the canary in the coal mine for a wide-scale restructuring of higher education as a whole” (Welch and Scott 5). Taken as an indicator of potential danger or collapse, Welch and Scott’s analogy of the canary in the coal mine seems fitting. If we take freshman writing programs in their current forms as symptomatic
of the American university’s increasing dependence on cheap labor in the form of graduate student assistants and contingent faculty, then other fields should take note. It seems unlikely that composition and writing studies are the only disciplines in which we could find evidence of inequitable working conditions; what we could say is that the problem appears to be more evident in courses that fulfill part of the institution’s universal requirement. First-year writing courses, for example — the sheer size of these courses demand additional labor. It just so happens that those conducting this labor are not compensated fairly for it. The pervasive spread of problematic labor concerns is not confined to a single field of study, and even if it was, the spread of academic capitalism would certainly mean that those fields currently untouched by the most invasive of labor issues wouldn’t remain as such for long. In scientific fields such as chemistry or biology, labs are increasingly taught by graduate students, some of them not significantly further along in their careers than the students they are teaching. Continuing their discussion of workers employed in higher education establishments, Kezar et al explore the effects of the Gig Academy on workers themselves. They argue that “as greater proportions of employees come to feel exploited by organizations nominally linked to the common good, any shared notion of campus community suffers” (37), undermining the security of stable employment and enduring feelings of other-ness on college campuses. In discussing the embedded neoliberal structures that affect each group of workers, Kezar et al reinforce the fact that “no aspect of higher education has gone untouched by neoliberal restructuring” (74).

Academic capitalism and neoliberalism have become the prevailing paradigm within higher education, for better or worse, and the rapid expansion of the gig economy
has exacerbated these trends. In 2014, at a meeting of the CCCC Labor Caucus, the Indianapolis Resolution was created as a two-fold response to the now fully-entrenched neoliberal academy: its first goal was to reimagine the Wyoming Resolution in light of 21st century exigencies and concerns; its second was to encourage “a robust response to neoliberal higher education” (Cox et al 43). The Indianapolis Resolution urges the fields and disciplines of composition and rhetoric to support, both materially and politically, new approaches to academic labor research. What Horning, and so many others who have responded to the Indianapolis Resolution, have touched on is the coalescence of major vectors of concern in terms of academic labor. For me, in my position as a graduate student teaching assistant, I identify these major vectors as follows. First, we need to better acknowledge the role that adjuncts and contingent faculty play in the teaching of writing, not to mention the ethical consideration that should be given to fair pay and compensation for their labor, by addressing some of the more tangible, material concerns effecting the labor of contingent instructors. Second, what is noticeably absent from the above is an equal consideration of graduate student labor, which seems to be overlooked in the majority of scholarship. While some may argue that the similarities between graduate student labor and those of other contingent groups are strong enough to subsume graduate students into the latter group. I argue that while these similarities are important to discuss within the frame of making changes to how labor exists in writing programs, the differences, the priorities, and the functionality of each group indicate that they are two separate groups, who should be considered as such despite sharing a number of labor-related concerns. So, where there is an abundance of literature discussion the labor concerns of contingent faculty, or labor concerns in general, the gap exists where
literature fails to examine graduate student labor concerns by itself. The Indianapolis Resolution, written by a group of compositionists to, “adopt and adapt the aims of the Wyoming Resolution within the broader contexts of our twenty-first-century political economy” (Cox et al 42), discusses graduate students in the context of their own studies, highlighting the need to educate graduate students about the “the difficulties—both enacting pedagogies and paying their bills—of teaching off the tenure track and be able to choose accordingly” (Cox et al 58).

The third vector of concern that has emerged more recently is the burden of emotional labor, frequently tied into interdisciplinary conversations of race and gender within higher education. Framing academic labor within the dialogue of “care work” — more explicitly defined in Chapter II but generally taken to mean work that is structured around service to others and involves caring motivations — draws on gendered labor in other fields, such as healthcare, via an anti-neoliberal and feminist lens. Finally, not distinctly but often appearing hand in hand with the other vectors of concern, issues of diversity in higher education and their specific relation to issues of academic labor continue to guide conversations about who works and what that work looks like. In addition to having broad institutional implications, “these trends also have specific importance for English departments, which are beginning to consider the implications of the fact that many undergraduate majors and most graduate students will teach for a living” (Miller 49). For Johnson et al, composition and rhetoric were in a unique position in the face of this restructuring: “As higher education grapples with the implications of corporatization…composition and rhetoric stands at a crossroads, defined both by an increased desire to professionalize the discipline through the establishment of upper
division and graduate writing programs and its historic commitment to expanding educational access and thereby participatory democracy” (42).

This project, then, is deeply personal. My own experiences as a graduate teaching assistant in a university writing program have highlighted the precarious nature of graduate student labor. The main exigence is based on my own lived experience. My own personal investment is as a graduate student who wants to see change in the labor conditions of our employment. I don’t mean to suggest that graduate students should be considered as, or are, more important than other types of instructors affected by academic labor concerns. Instead, the graduate assistant experience is relatively undervalued within the context of higher education in the United States, due primarily to the changing structures of the academy that simultaneously class them as employees and students. As a 2017 WPA-GO Labor Taskforce survey suggests, the instructors of undergraduate writing courses are very often graduate students who exist in that space between student and teacher, subsequently shouldering a dual burden of responsibility yet are inadequately compensated for their teaching responsibilities. Labor completed above and beyond the agreed contracted is seen by many writing program administrators as expected — the WPA-GO report cites one instance in which a WPA claimed that experiencing additional labor demands as graduate students is a form of professionalization that will help students get jobs, despite the fact that these jobs are often contingent, therefore recreating the same conditions (1).

Further, this research examines graduate students for the simple reason that I believe this research has a potential impact that stretches beyond my own current position. A number of graduate students will go from the relatively stable employment as
a graduate assistant to adjunct roles or other contingent positions as the WPA-GO report suggests — and most likely will continue to face unfavorable labor conditions — but some will go on to tenure-track or administrative positions. As this research attempts to do, in saying that the current labor conditions of graduate student instructors are unacceptable and require attention, there is perhaps a greater chance of affecting change at all levels of the university.

Additionally, there have been a number of articles over the last few years about the decline of the English major, and of the English Ph.D (Chace, 2009; Woods, 2020). As of the 2015-16 school year, the number of English majors had gone down by 22% over the last decade. These numbers are especially troubling because college enrollment has gone up. This trend is due in part to the economic recession of 2008, which left many young adults very worried about their future financially. Since this recession, data from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that English has seen a decline in majors of over a quarter, which is the largest drop that the center has recorded for any major. The question turns to: what happens if people stop doing graduate degrees in English or other programs that equip them to teach writing, and what happens if writing programs lose significant portions of their teachers? Perhaps it sounds dramatic or overzealous, but addressing the labor concerns that may be turning people off graduate study might subsequently help with other issues that have longer lasting implications for the future of our field of study, such as the value of a literature degree, the ever-increasing


relevance of critical source analysis, and as discussed elsewhere, the rise of technical, professional, and business writing industries. It is composition’s ability, suggests Annie Mendenhall, “to adopt multiple areas of ‘expertise’ [that] has facilitated the growth of professional writing, and digital media studies—specializations that have diversified profitable ways, but that challenge the boundaries between academic occupation” (27).

Graduate student assistants are an exploited class of workers, and I suggest that the consequences of continued exploitation may have long-term effects on both the workers themselves, but also the students they teach. At a fundamental level, if the social structures surrounding higher education will not change, and the commodification of learning continues, then we must capitalize on it and explore the links between working conditions and learning outcomes. Happier teachers have been shown to lead to happier students, and “future education reforms should place special emphasis on improving teacher job satisfaction and school culture” (Banerjee et al). Ultimately, there will not be a simple solution to the problems explored above. In establishing their ethos as educators, graduate students, contingent and part-time faculty must grapple with the realities of academic labor in a system that continues to work against them.

This dissertation, therefore, seeks to answer the following questions: what are the labor concerns of graduate student assistants working in writing programs, and how are these connected to the material and financial resources offered by the institution? What resources exist beyond just the financial and material, and if any are present, do graduate student assistants feel that they are able to access these resources? Additionally, what are

5 The study by Banerjee et al focuses on elementary education using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. While their claims are generalizable to education in general, for data on higher education specifically, see: Arora, 2020; Hebert, 2019; Kroncke, 2006.
the labor concerns of instructors teaching classes not housed in a first year sequence, and what conclusions can we draw about the role of First-Year Composition/English/Writing in academic labor conversations? In grappling with the network of issues highlighted by the gathered data, many of which happen concurrently and symbiotically, it becomes clear that proposals for reform overlook the inherent human activity underlying labor, compounded by the fact that “mainstream Composition…seems to be remarkably uninformed about organized labor” (Bousquet et al 84).

To further illustrate these issues, I have gathered data on this ‘next generation’ of writing instructors, examining the role graduate students play within writing programs, and how their labor is continually exploited despite the significant contribution graduate students make to the academic and social goals of the university. This chapter illuminates this project’s dual exigence — one that is encouraged by my own position as a graduate assistant, and the other that builds on the recent problematic trends within the American university that have arisen out of the changing economic structures that surround higher education. In Chapter II, I offer a literature review of key works from the fields of academic labor studies, composition studies, and writing program administration, additionally drawing on research from disability studies and gender studies to inform specific areas of the research. This section will organize the literature by grouping together similar themes, topics, and concepts, culminating in a section that brings central concepts together. Chapter III presents my research methods and methodologies, which are informed by survey data analysis. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of how graduate assistants experience issues surrounding academic labor, particularly their own, and provided a way to develop a number of proposed solutions from the data.
in order to suggest improved practices for future generations of workers. The fourth chapter of this research will present the results of the survey proposed above. In this chapter, I will discuss the limitations of the study, and will include tabulated results from the gathered data, and will connect this back to the themes and trends identified in Chapter II. Chapter V will discuss the results in detail, developing the discussion initiated in Chapter IV and situating these ideas within what the results suggest about the current state of labor in writing programs. I argue here, in the analysis of the gathered data, that instead of the results being indicative of any guarantee or certainty, they are representative of current trends in Departments of English and of the current concerns of graduate assistants within those departments. Further, I expect these results to indicate that these trends are not localized, but are in fact nationwide, building in to a broader conversation about the effects of neoliberal capitalism on higher education institutions, and urging university administrators, tenured faculty, and writing program administrators to encourage significant overhauls of the current academic labor system starting at the highest levels of the academy.

I do not anticipate that this dissertation will fix or solve the problems laid out in what follows — the problem is far too big for that to be the case. Instead, I hope that the results of this project will contribute to the ongoing movement for better working conditions for all graduate student instructors. While this research does focus on the issues found in English departments, I echo Marc Bousquet and his co-authors (2004) in suggesting that “Rhetoric and composition appears to exemplify the sad ideal of labor relations in the managed university” (4). I argue that the results gathered here speak to wider issues of academic labor in higher education, highlighting their relevance as a
microcosm of ongoing national trends, and proposing solutions for addressing and mitigating these trends.
CHAPTER 2
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Defining Key Terms

In my introduction, I suggested that surges in graduate student activism, campus worker union action, and the proliferation of poor working conditions for graduate student assistants and adjuncts have emerged from changing structures within and around higher education. In this chapter, I offer a literature review of key works from the fields of academic labor studies, composition studies, and writing program administration, additionally drawing on research from disability studies and gender studies to inform specific areas of the research. This section will organize the literature by grouping together similar themes, topics, and concepts, culminating in a section that brings central concepts together. This final synthesis of the literature will begin answering the questions: how are these varying fields working together to inform my study, and what does the extant literature overlook?

The way universities have adapted in response to growing capitalist agenda of higher education institutions has meant that labor, both specifically within the American university and more broadly, has offered us the opportunity to ask “what productive, definite social relations are actively re-situating university and its labor within the demands, proliferations, and contradictions of capital?” (Gregory and Winn 1). Gregory
and Winn go on to suggest that, amongst all of the scholarship offering negative critiques of the political economy of capitalism and its effect on higher education, there is an evident need to “understand the basic character of ‘labor’ in capitalism as a historically specific social form” (1). Given the interdisciplinary nature of academic labor studies, and the ways that elements of this research could be applied to fields outside of composition and writing studies, it is in the project’s best interests to define some of the key terms as I am using them in relation to the literature and the subsequent discussion.

**Contingency**

When I talk about contingency in relation to academic labor, I use it in the same way as Joe Berry (2005) has done. The terms *contingent faculty* and *contingent labor* describe the group of academic practitioners for whom there is no permanent employment contract; any contracts that do exist rarely, if ever, exist for longer than a single year. In other words, contingent faculty are frequently hired on a *per annum* basis. The terminology associated with this community of educators varies; one commonality, however, is that all ways of referring to contingent faculty highlight the differences in the class structures present in the American university. Serving a program in a profession that is often viewed as a supplemental service to the university provokes constant insecurity in the mind of the contingent faculty member in our current system of academic labor.

While not the focal point of this research, this project uses these two terms — *contingent faculty* and *contingent labor* — in an attempt to unify those who count themselves among this class of academic laborers, including: adjuncts, instructors, part-timers, lecturers, and more (Berry, xi).
While at first glance it seems that graduate student assistants have been overlooked in the extant literature — and, to an extent, they have — further examination suggests that they have more likely been subsumed under the banner of contingent laborers. This subsuming can be explained by a number of factors, and I argue that the two groups should be considered separately. First, as will be discussed later, graduate students are limited to how they can supplement their income, even those with assistantships. Adjuncts and other contingent groups do not necessarily have the same constraints. Second, the dynamics of the increase in adjuncts has been very different and dramatic in comparison to the use of graduate students. The motivation for using adjuncts is also very different from graduate students, who include teaching duties as part of their training rather than just for compensation. Finally, the use of graduate student instructors is largely limited to four-year institutions, as will be evidenced by the results of the survey conducted in this study.

Academic Capitalism

For the longest time, higher education has seemed to exist outside of commercial systems. Not that universities and colleges have been free from the effects of capitalism, but that the structures of the American university system have not necessarily been geared towards profit-making in the traditional capitalist sense. These days, however, signs and symbols of capitalism have permeated the academy itself — scholars seek outside funding to further commercial interests, academic departments design courses to steer students towards lucrative careers, and administrators replace tenure-track positions
with more ‘cost-effective’ temporary positions. These changes are what this project considers *academic capitalism*.

For Kevin McClure, “the theory of academic capitalism was designed to help us describe and explain how colleges and universities are changing in response to a couple of external pressures. Those external pressures include things like the advent of a global knowledge economy. In that economy, the idea is that knowledge becomes much more valuable. Organizations like colleges and universities that produce knowledge suddenly have products that they’re able to buy and sell and trade in global markets” (Koenig).

Building on their earlier work on the theory of academic capitalism, Slaughter and Leslie (2001) similarly suggest that academic capitalism “speaks to the dramatically shifting boundaries between public and private sector organizations, and finally it attends to variance in power, both within the organization and in the organizations and markets in the larger political economy” (156).

In this project, *academic capitalism* is a broader system of financial, economic, and socio-political factors that influence the internal policy making of American universities and academic institutions. The way it is used here, *academic capitalism* and its multifaceted impact on higher education should be thought of as the cause underlying a number of academic labor concerns.

**Graduate Students and Graduate Student Assistants**

In this research, I use *graduate student assistants* in a way that exemplifies the duality of their role: first, as students who have already earned at least an undergraduate degree, and second, when joined with either ‘teaching’ or some other qualifier, as
instructors or holding other related positions. *Graduate student assistants* are those students enrolled in graduate programs who have been offered some form of compensated employment as part of their academic offer, whether it be teaching or research, as previously mentioned, or other departmental responsibilities. *Graduate student(s)* is used in the discussion to refer to all students enrolled in graduate courses, including both those with and without assistantships.

### 2.2 Academic Labor in the Capitalist American University

This crisis in and around academic labor is rooted in what Marxist economics labels as use value versus exchange value. Use value refers to a product's utility in satisfying needs and wants as afforded by its material properties. Exchange value is the “quantitative relation, as the proportion in which values in use of one sort are exchanged for those of another sort” (Marx 46); that is, it is based on a product’s use value for others, social use value. Both derive from the expenditure of labor power — use value from the qualitative aspect of work as transforming useless matter into useful objects, and exchange value from the purely quantitative, commensurable side of work: abstract labor. Gregory and Winn elaborate, suggesting that part of the problem is that ‘labor’ is too frequently an abstract concept. “Abstract labor,” they suggest, “is retrospectively quantified in terms of *socially necessary labor time*, which is the time it takes, on average, to produce commodities” (2, emphasis added). But what is this social necessity? Who is defining what is classed as socially necessary, and how are they reaching that conclusion?
In market-oriented corporate universities, which are “subjected to sustained political, cultural, and economic assault” (Nelson, xvi), it is claimed that knowledge is measured and traded as a commodity, and students play the role of consumers who really operate the rudder of the 'market' universities. For Stanley Aronowitz (1997), “the growing influence of corporate giving on private and public research universities has been supplemented by a cultural corporatization of higher education” (103). The “emerging academic proletariat” (104), as Aronowitz calls it, is increasingly made up of graduate students, recent doctoral graduates, and part-time instructors, and “must be denied by the professoriat, who have gained richly from the labor of their ‘students’" (107).

But for Johnson et al, “a sustained look at the casual inaction of academic labor suggests that it is in fact the rot at the heart of the new corporate university system, relentlessly compromising the core values of traditional university life” (62). If we will be unable to move the American university away from capitalist structures, and Marxist labor relations will continue to simmer at the center of it, then one massive exigence seems to be overlooked. It seems like common sense to suggest that happier teachers, or at the very least, teachers that are satisfied with their working conditions, subsequently feel better about the job they are doing. A greater level of satisfaction amongst the instructional staff necessarily leads to a more satisfied students. We wouldn’t even need to look to hard to find examples of how a teacher’s enthusiasm has a direct effect on how much of the content is absorbed by the pupils, from elementary all the way up.

Maricuțoiu et al (2023) found that there was a direct link between a teacher’s level of
stress and the levels of engagement amongst their students; after a similar study, Harrison et al (2023) found that, “greater wellbeing, of which job satisfaction is an important component, is a predictor of better work outcomes…Teachers who are more satisfied with their jobs are also better teachers, as indexed by higher cognitive activation and greater clarity” (15). Places of education at all levels, they argue, should implement policies and practices which meaningfully focus on teachers' job satisfaction, and “the quality of their relationships with students should be strategic priorities for school leaders and policymakers, given the strong association between instructional quality and student outcomes” (Harrison et al 18).

So, happier teachers equals happier students (Boehm and Lyubomirsky, 2008). Happier students, students who inherit the enthusiasm of their instructors and regurgitate that into higher retention rates, increased levels of participation and engagement, and, perhaps most saliently to the capitalist model of education, higher grades. Because under the current structures of education, those higher grades translate into capital and earning potential; the higher the grades, the higher the potential returns on investment. While a portion of this money often goes back into programs such as athletics, or Pan-Hellenic organizations, some of it will go to into broader aspects of the university. Fundamentally, the capitalist authorities that have managed to raise profit-making to the foremost objective cannot be anything other than pleased with anything that increases revenue. All of this is to say, increasing the satisfaction levels of the workers doing the teaching has the potential to achieve the core tenet of capitalist higher education: making money.
To return to Marxist economics as it relates to labor values, as previously discussed, Marx initially differentiates between the use value and exchange value of a commodity. Exchange value, as its label suggests, is the value something has when exchanged for another commodity, but this exchange implies an equivalency, that the two commodities are equal in some way (Slack, 2020). The production of commodities can take many forms, including the production of ideas and affects. This is key given that the academic labor process is a site of intellectual and affective production. Marx makes the claim that the commonality between all commodities as exchange values is that they are all products of human labor:

But even the product of labor has already been transformed in our hands. If we make abstraction from its use value, we abstract also from the material constituents and forms which make it a use-value. It is no longer a table, a house, a piece of yarn or any other useful thing. All its sensuous characteristics are extinguished. Nor is it any longer the product of the labor of the joiner, the mason, or the spinner, or of any other particular kind of productive labor. With the disappearance of the useful character of the products of labor, the useful character of the kinds of labor embodied in them also disappears; this in turn entails the disappearance of the different concrete forms of labor. They can no longer be distinguished but are all together reduced to the same kind of labor, human labor in the abstract (Marx 128).

“The real argument” (Wolff 98) of Marx’s value theory is that by using it - the concepts of abstract human labor and surplus value - the source of profit can be explained as one
form that surplus value can take. Within academic capitalism, academic goods are increasingly generated to make a direct profit. Universities are often funded out of direct private capital investment. Both autonomously and at the request of government, universities are increasingly providing research and development activities directly for private capital, or acting themselves as private capitalists. A classic example of this is the MIT model, where universities patent profitable research findings and develop spin-off companies in partnership with venture capitalists. The exploitation occurs when the apparent surplus value of academic labor is devalued against its exchange value; the two commodities — in an academic context, the labor of the teaching staff, both tenured and non-tenured, and their compensation — have become de-equivalenced, but the demand has not increased. Marx differentiated between the labor aristocracy (privileged workers who, if exploited, appear to have a significant material gain from this exploitation) and the ‘reserve army of labor’ — that is, workers who are either unemployed or have casualized work relations. The advantage of drawing on Marx’s approach is that it enables us to understand how social and structural differentiation in the academic labor process enables relationships of exploitation to be both produced and reproduced.

The overwhelmingly negative response to the pervasive roots tangled up in the structure of higher education centers around “a shift in focus from access to completion rates, increased faculty exploitation and proletarianization, ideological attacks on faculty, fierce competition for resources, and rising tuition and student debt. In addition, regional accrediting agencies have mandated outcomes assessment as a self-regulatory tool to ward off government intervention and assure the ‘value’ of a college education in a
transnational capitalist economy marked by job insecurity, flexible employment, and wealth inequality” (Welch and Scott 37). It’s not as if the current economic system has gone without valid critique, but perhaps few criticisms are as tragic as the effects of capitalism on higher learning. That’s not to say that there isn’t a list of significant length of sectors that would be infinitely better if they didn’t have to worry about a profit margin: health care, for one; the prison system and incarceration; and, obviously, education. While capitalism is certainly not all bad, and there are certain efficiencies that capitalism can provide, it is hard to justify why private profit should be the end goal of the education system.

In How The University Works, Marc Bousquet compares this epochal shift among the administration of higher education to “the better-understood realities of managed health care” (1). The implementation of market behaviors in both industries - the examples Bousquet uses are competition for resources and profit-seeking - “have resulted in the sort of dizzying inequalities formerly associated with the Gilded Age” (Bousquet 1). In the name of maximizing revenue, healthcare managers and providers offer more costly services to the wealthy, while at the same time offering degraded service to lower-income patients. These same phenomena are seen in higher education. Bousquet writes that, “Because the calculus of profit demands continuous reduction in the costs of care, especially the expensive labor time of highly trained professionals, the ‘management’ of care implies the substitution of lesser-skilled and lesser-paid workers” (1-2). Within the structures of higher education, this is seen in the exponential growth in the use of graduate student, contingent, and non-tenured faculty.
Herein lies the problem, the root of the weed that is strangling the life out of higher education: at its very core, it has become entirely transactional. Higher education is now reduced to an exchange of goods. Like all things in capitalism, it’s become nothing more than an exchange of goods and services: money for diplomas. While self-investment — students paying money to provide themselves with a broader range of options for their futures — isn’t inherently problematic, its continuity thrives under a flawed premise: that all things are value based on the ability to produce economic gains. There is an evident correlation⁶ between how much an education costs, what positions can be achieved with that education, and what that position provides back to both the capitalist economy and the worker themselves. The earning potential of a degree in Fine Arts pales in comparison to the expected returns of an advanced degree in project management or business administration.

What this means for academic labor is that not only are instructors — at all levels, fighting against changing dynamics and orientations within their own programs and departments, they are continuously battling the economic powers on the outside. If the focus of higher education pivots to promote business-oriented models of learning, then, as Ishmael Munene suggests, “Against such a background, contingent faculty…include[s]

a whole gamut of all non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty with the common denominator of

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job insecurity, low compensation, hard promotion, governance exclusion, limited academic freedom, and undeserved disrespect” (17).

2.3 Adjuncts and Contingent Labor

Interdisciplinary scholarship on academic labor studies has traditionally focused on the working conditions of those that are employed in higher education as tenured faculty, non-tenured faculty, and non-instructional staff. For Ishmael Munene (2018), the omnipresent incursion of neoliberal values in higher education is shown as the cause of the exploitation of academic labor, the diminishing of academic freedom, and the proletarianization of the contingent faculty. There are also others who would confess to the idea that the de-professionalized labor conditions within composition studies and writing instruction — again seen to exemplify labor conditions and concerns at the broader institutional level — is a systemic symptom of much larger problems. One of the ways to counter these sprawling, inter-related symptoms of academic capitalism is to adopt a holistic view of the entire infrastructure of higher education as the defective entity, rather than individually problematic constituent parts. That is to say, the ‘problem’ isn’t just in one program or department; it is omnipresent, even if labor concerns may appear and exist differently between disciplines. Composition’s role is to once again — perhaps to continue — serve as Welch and Scott’s “canary in the coal mine” to start implementing broader structural changes (5).

Benjamin Ginsberg (2011) notes that the self-governing faculty are being supplanted by an army of administrators bent upon squeezing the university, not for creative innovation among the researchers, nor for academic rigor among the
professoriate but rather, these administrators are squeezing the university for financial efficiency touting profit as a primary consideration. Ginsburg states that since there is evidence that adjuncts are generally cheaper employees than tenure-track or tenured faculty, and that since adjuncts and contingent faculty are subject to more stringent administrative supervision, “there is every reason to believe that adjuncts will continue to replace full-time faculty at most of America’s colleges and universities” (136). He adds his belief that it is entirely likely that, “within a few decades…only a very small percentage of faculty members, mainly at elite schools, will hold tenured or tenure-track appointments” (Ginsburg 136).

In *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower*, Joe Berry (2005) makes a similar case. Collective problems, such as those faced by contingent faculty, must be faced by collective action. The current systemic flaws did not suddenly emerge overnight, nor was it the result of some historic battle that the academics lost to the administration. Instead, the contingent labor crisis is a symptom of small changes to academic labor in the university, changes that were, perhaps, necessary at the time. Berry notes that, “driven by both the desire for flexibility and tightening economics, administrators have transformed the teaching force since the 1970s” (5). There is an irony present in the processes of marginalization and de-skilling, as Berry sees it, when a profession like teaching, with the protection of tenure, allows itself to be slowly replaced by a labor force which has neither security nor fair compensation.

In English departments and writing programs specifically, the 2019-2020 MLA Job List Report shows that in this time period, there were 728 English-related jobs
posted; of these, 55% were marked as tenure track, 25.6% as non-tenure track, and 19.4% were submitted with tenure status unspecified. In comparison, between 2015-2016, there were 823 jobs advertised, with 67.1% on the tenure track, 31.7% listed as non-tenure track, and only 1.2% unspecified. While it is generally a positive sign that in comparison to the data from the earlier period, there were fewer advertised non-tenure track positions in 2019-2020, it is concerning that there has been a significant rise in job postings that do not indicate the tenure status of available positions. On one hand, this could be an attempt to add flexibility to the role; on the other, it could read as an attempt to subvert criticism for still relying too heavily on non-tenure track faculty. Composition studies must also reckon with the fact that they and other writing associated programs still advertise more non-tenure track or tenure-unspecified jobs than literature fields.

In many cases, the professoriate has been co-opted by administration to implement this transformation on behalf of the institution in the name of financial solvency. Berry cites the conditions contingent faculty face today and draws parallels to the conditions that the Working Class has faced in the past, in the eras of the steel barons and railroad tycoons, and even the plight of modern day transient agricultural workers. The contingent faculty laborer has become the majority in the realm of academia and the subjugation of the academic shows no signs of moderation: “These trends have created a new class line within higher education. This class line is not between contingent and regular faculty—though the difference between them has increased in some ways—but rather, as contingent faculty have become the norm for faculty, between contingent
faculty and those who own, control, and manage institutions of higher learning in the United States” (Berry 12).

To clarify: Berry is not equating the labor of adjuncts and contingent faculty to 19th century railroad workers. Rather, his claim is that the power structures that maintain these systems, particularly the systems exploiting contingent labor in higher education, are almost identical to the ones that attempted to limit the earning potential of its workers in previous industrial eras. The power structures are similar in the respect that they aim to exact profit for a few select individuals through exploitation of an unprotected, flexible, and sometimes even transient labor force. These hegemonic forces that evoke the oppressors of old power structures that oppressed the laborers of old and the circumstances of the new contingency of academic labor also share another attribute that is quite insidious: a kind invisibility, wrapped in the cloak of the status quo they are often accepted as a new normal.

While “the Indianapolis Resolution opens the door to helping improve the lives of contingent faculty…we need to address their ability to work with all students” (Horning 75). Horning’s point is that the expectations of contingent faculty and part-time instructors often far outweighs the training that they have. She cites the lack of professional development afforded to these groups of workers, claiming that “faculty members should be equipped [via professional development] with specific strategies they can take directly into their classrooms” (75), instead of standing as the mainstay in terms of implementing a program’s pedagogical mission and other related academic activities. McDonald (in McClure et al 2017) states that despite organizations such as CCCC and
NCTE drafting policies and recommendations intended to improve the working conditions of compositions and writing instructors, the complexity of contingent faculty problems has frequently resulted in separate statements specific to their experiences:

“Faculty who teach writing and direct writing programs have access to several comprehensive statements on labor practices and working conditions, including the Statement, CWPA’s Portland Resolution (Hult et al.), IWCA’s What Lies Ahead for Writing Centers: Position Statement on Professional Concerns (Simpson), the AWP Guidelines for Creative Writing Programs & Teachers of Creative Writing, and TESOL, Inc.’s Position Statement on Professional Equity for the Field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. These statements attempt to cover almost everything that impacts the working conditions of faculty in the discipline, including salaries and benefits, job security, hiring criteria, tenure and promotion criteria and respect for the field's scholarship, support of faculty scholarship (travel funds), faculty development opportunities, teaching conditions (class sizes and teaching load), and material support (office space, computer, telephone, and supplies). The scope of these statements varies widely, however” (86).

Composition studies and its associated fields “ha[ve] begun to build a storehouse of disciplinary scholarship detailing the underlife of contingent faculty” (Fedukovich 40).
The myth that contingent instructors are happy contributing their expertise to the field as supplementary altruistic philanthropy — with zero academic freedom and no professional standing to speak of — is debunked. Kahn cites Eileen Schell when he says: "teachers are
expected to find the internal payoff of teaching so high that the financial payoff isn’t relevant. Nowadays, the argument seems to be that anybody who doesn’t find the emotional payoff sufficient is morally bankrupt” (Kahn 110). Schell and Kahn critique this stance, and yet it is quite common. Teachers at all levels sustain themselves emotionally through their passion for their work, even when their pay falls short. From this body of research, using composition as an illustration of institution-wide concerns, the plight of the current system of academic labor, over-reliant on de-professionalized and contingent labor, is starkly revealed (Bérubé and Ruth 12).

2.4 Labor and Disability Studies

Using ‘disability’ in its literal, etymological sense — that is, as the result of external factors that limit, restrict, or deny a body's ability to act — one can argue that research on graduate student and contingent labor share significant overlap with disability studies, if we accept that there are a multitude of external factors affecting these groups’ working ability. For most official definitions of disability, such as those used by the World Health Organization, the U.N., and the Americans with Disabilities Act (U.S.), there are two staple components: 1) a physical or mental characteristic labeled or perceived as an impairment or dysfunction and 2) some personal or social limitation associated with that impairment. The characterization of both components is the topic of much debate. Several scholars have challenged the prevailing view of impairment as objective and biologically grounded (Shakespeare, 2010; Terzi, 2009), also arguing that the prevailing definitions used for official purposes either imply that biological
impairments are the sole reason for limitation, or that, at the other extreme, attribute the limitations faced by disabled people solely to social attitudes and practices.

Where old paradigms of disability studies positioned disability as the result of a deficit in an individual that prevented that individual from performing certain functions or activities, known as the medical model, more recent paradigms recognize that the concept of disability (as a noun separate from any kind of embodiment) as a series of interactions between an individual and an environment. This new paradigm — the social model — of disability studies maintains that disability is a product of an interaction between characteristics (e.g., conditions or impairments, functional status, or personal and social qualities) of the individual and characteristics of the natural, built, cultural, and social environments (Turner et al. 1). There are variations in how the social model is understood by disability scholars. Beaudry (2016) indicates that some applications of the social model refuse to acknowledge the links between impairment and disability in an attempt to limit “disability” to the effects of exclusion and discrimination; other versions of the social model emphasize the intersectional and interactive nature of disability (Altman, 2001). These latter approaches treat disability as an interaction between biological and social causes, denying priority to either.

The social model approach to disability studies builds on the perceived differences between disability — social exclusion — and impairment — physical limitations (Oliver). A group of disability studies researchers at the University of Leeds explained this differentiation as:
A disabled person is a person with an impairment who experiences disability.

Disability is the result of negative interactions that take place between a person with an impairment and her or his social environment. Impairment is thus part of a negative interaction, but it is not the cause of, nor does it justify, disability (1). They add that ‘impairment’ refers to “an injury, illness, or congenital condition that causes or is likely to cause a loss or difference of physiological or psychological function” (1), whereas a disability is “the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in society on an equal level with others due to social and environmental barriers” (1).

In *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*, Jay Dolmage argues that, “[disability studies] research has allowed for an ongoing critique of the exclusive machinery of higher education and its physical, economic, affective (or emotional) costs” (5). He adds that, “Ableism drifts. Therefore, so must accommodations and access. When educators recognize physical inaccessibility, they can and should read intellectual and social inaccessibility into this space” (10). Disability has been a rhetorically produced stigma that could be applied to other marginalized groups to keep them out of the university and away from access to resources and privileges. As such, we can take Dolmage’s theoretical framework for rethinking the rhetoric of disability as it applies to higher education as a lens for reexamining contingent and graduate student labor as disabled by the frequent lack of accommodations and access to resources.

John Levin (2007) argues that within the structures of higher education in the United States, large groups of people have their potential disabled because learning is only understood in terms of capital and neoliberalism (4). Levin also notes the
importance of the presence of people with disabilities within these populations. In this sense, getting to the bottom of the issue of injustice within higher education, he identifies the main problem as the fact that these students find themselves in conditions of segregation and beyond the margins. While Levin’s scholarship focuses on community college, many of his thoughts apply to larger four-year universities. He challenges the claim that the community college provides open access, both because the notion of open access is not absolute due to selection admission rules such as test score results, and as he adds, institutions are often unable, or unwilling, to accommodate nontraditional, disadvantaged students (Levin 12). The importance of this claim lies in the fact that if traditional students “continue to be viewed as the norm,” in reality, nontraditional students “are now the rule, not the exception” (Levin 23). Levin concludes that “we can judge a nation’s or a state’s educational apparatus by how well it facilitates actual, not merely formal, equal opportunity for the worst-off citizen” (47). However, his explicit attack on neoliberalism is grounded in the fact that higher education “has become a global business” (52). The logic of productivity typical of neoliberalism is “in conflict with the needs of disadvantaged students in higher education— those who require basic skills, social education, and personal attention” (ibid.). It is in this context that Levin emphasizes again the issue of people with both physical and mental disabilities.

Disability in the classroom, both literally and conceptually, is transforming how we think about the normative goals of education and the requirements of an accessible classroom. Claire McKinney explores the idea of “cripping the classroom”, which she
writes “entails developing a political understanding of disability as a socially constructed category that focuses attention on questions of accessibility as central normative concerns for interpersonal, intellectual, and social relations” (114). This concept, she argues, may allow broader fields, such as writing disciplines and humanities-based subjects, to develop a “crip epistemology” that “explores the the limits of knowledge, whether it be in the ephemeral nature of some knowledge, the loss of access to knowledge in certain circumstances or bodies, or an active refusal to produce knowledge in particular ways” (116). Scholars working at the intersection of disability studies and composition studies have a longstanding history of interrogating access in writing classrooms, working both within and against traditional models of accommodations. The publication of the 2001 article “Becoming Visible” marked a key moment when the discipline began to purposefully attend to issues of disability and access in college writing (Brueggemann et al.). During the following decade, several scholars responded to this call for attention, attending to issues such as learning disability discourse (Feldmeier White) and alternative assistance efforts within writing programs (Barber-Fendley and Hamel).

Disability scholarship leads Lauren Obermark to argue for understanding disability studies as a form of inquiry into concerns that affect everyone as these studies consider how the “collaboration and interdependence” that improve conditions for people with disabilities can enhance everyone’s lives (176). Such an approach, she contends, makes questions about access “generative” rather than casting access as a way of correcting a specific problem through “accommodations” that can create more obstacles.
than they remove (174, 193-94). Noting that institutions implement procedures that attempt to resolve access problems, Obermark describes many such efforts as part of a “disability bypass,” which renders people needing different forms of access invisible as their needs have supposedly been met. In graduate schools, she argues, this bypass takes the form of insistence that no student succeeding in academia meets the definition of disabled (182). Obermark’s survey examines the ways she believes the university and the students alike bypass or deny the existence of students for whom extant forms of access mean struggle (181). Maintaining with other disability scholars that “accommodation” is not “access,” Obermark argues that accommodation as generally provided “requires a great deal of emotional labor from students,” making it their responsibility to inform and educate their instructors individually about their needs, thus “reliev[ing] the professor (or the institution) from making a wider change” (192-93).

In the same way that those who work in higher education with disabilities that directly affect the physical body face particular challenges in terms of entering and working in academia, graduate students and adjuncts face similar issues in terms of physical limitations and constraints on their ability to work. These groups frequently find themselves without office space, for example, or ineligible for ‘faculty’ parking permits. While in reality there may be plenty of ‘other’ spaces to work, the act of denying a particular group of workers access to physical space simultaneously reminds us of arguments within disability studies about building accessibility, while also highlighting the privileged position of able-ness. The limited material resources available to these
marginalized groups also act as factors for disabling graduate students and adjuncts, holding particular weight as it relates to the current pandemic and changes to higher education pedagogy. In response to COVID-19 and the transition to distant/online learning, a number of contingent employees have struggled with facilitating this transition, particularly in light of the constraints that are placed on them. Commentary has recently emerged amongst graduate students around the failure of institutions to provide things like the ‘full’ version of Microsoft Teams which would enable them to host and organize virtual instruction — the available version of the software only granted them access to join meetings, since they were considered students, and not instructors or administrators. This is to say nothing of the problems faced by those instructors who are constrained by actual disabilities, such as hearing or vision loss, nor of the adjunct faculty forced to travel to numerous campuses and put their (already disabled) bodies at further risk in the middle of an ongoing pandemic.

It appears that an attitude amongst the higher echelons of university administration is that the bulk of its workforce — contingent and graduate student labor — own their ‘disability’. Graduate students, after all, choose to be graduate students. Contingent labor, after all, cannot be surprised by the pitfalls of contingency. The problem with this attitude is that, just as early paradigms within disability studies neglected the social construction of disability, institutions overlook the internal structures that contribute to the disadvantages faced by the ‘disabled’ groups of workers. The commercialization and commodification of higher education means that everything has an associated cost, and those who are paid the least are held down by a system that does
not attribute fair or equal value to their labor. For each of the different types of resources that should be available to the academic labor force at a university, we must also ask the following question: who has access? Here I mean access in both its literal and perhaps more figurative sense. The concept of the ivory tower has long been discussed in both disability studies and in academic labor studies; Dolmage writes in the first of a series of metaphors that “the university erects steep steps to keep certain bodies and minds out” (42).

All this considered, it seems within reason to argue that those working in precarious positions within the university — adjuncts, contingent faculty, graduate students — are disabled. Not by any individual prohibitions, but instead by an environment, a system, that by its inherent designs seeks to impair the ability of these bodies to function to their full potential. If disabilities exist in contradiction to the social construction of what we think of as ‘normal’ bodies, then equally, the dis(ability) and impairment of graduate student and contingent labor challenge how we understand the ‘normal’ body in academia. The idea of the hard-working, over-worked professor with tenure is no longer an accurate image of the core labor force within the institution.

But what academia considers ‘normal’ is inherently problematic; just as in disability studies, the issue isn’t those that are disabled, but the system that fails to account for the reality of the lived and embodied experience of its workers. The ‘ideal’ neoliberal institution is a myth, illustrated in increasingly focused detail by the lack of resources available to invisible and marginalized groups of workers. These resources can
be physical (office space, for example), material (such as access to printing services or classroom supplies), professional (the lack of opportunities for professional development afforded to graduate students), or financial (adequate monetary compensation, access to affordable health insurance or other insurance benefits).

If graduate student and contingent labor are disabled by the institution, then the ableist structure of higher education actively forces the bodies of these impaired workers into invisibility, subsequently rendering their labor unseen. The language that has, historically, surrounded disabilities, disability studies, and critical disability studies, has generally been one of disempowerment. In contrast, the more recent implementation of language more aligned with the social model of disability provides opportunities to create an ecology of language centered around equality and inclusion. How disability language has evolved, particularly what terminology is or is not appropriate for conversations about people with disabilities, further leads to ongoing research within disability studies as to how language is used to address the experience(s) of disability. Contemporary culture, both in more broader terms and in the culture of higher education, has dismissed, discounted, and more importantly discriminated against disabled people by focusing on their differences or incapabilities, rather than on the individuality of those very same people.

In thinking about the implications of the word ‘accommodations’ and what it means in relation to both disability studies and academic labor studies, the term itself attaches a negative connotation to people with disabilities in the American university setting. The prevailing hegemonic ideologies throughout the United States are centered
around neoliberal values and ideas, especially meritocracy, which claims that each person is responsible for their own successes. As a result, meritocratic systems such as the university perpetuate the belief that no special services should be provided that might unfairly disadvantage some over others (Dolmage 106). While institutions and organizational bodies have addressed the flaws in this belief with the passing of such legislation as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the pervasive neoliberal ideology, in some ways, encourages people without disabilities to view accommodations as a threat to their education, upon American values, and their abilities to pursue economic equality. The ADA has equally been criticized for its use of ‘accommodations’, with disabilities studies scholars arguing that ‘accommodations’ implies something de-linked from necessity, given instead out of generosity. Continually focusing on individual accommodations allows institutions to minimize their responsibility for diverse course pathways, and it places the burden of ensuring inclusive university learning on disabled students themselves (Aspis, 1997; Dowse, 2001). Changing the terminology might be a step towards reinforcing the belief that everybody should have equal access to higher education without their attendance being seen as something that requires special measures. Perhaps more importantly, the conversation in disability studies has moved away from using ‘disabled’ and towards ‘persons with disabilities’. As Cara Liebowitz (2015) suggests, this “people-first language” emphasizes putting the person first and the disability second: for example, saying a person with a spinal cord injury, or a person with a history of depression. Many disabled people, however, disagree: they are not a ‘person with a disability’. Rather, they are a ‘disabled person’ — someone
who is disabled by a world that does not allow them to participate and flourish. Such an epistemology may be particularly useful in examining issues with access as it applies to academic labor studies.

Additionally, making disabilities overt and explicit as an opposition to an oppressive system and to the constraints of the neoliberal academy may be further enabled by using “crip theory” (McRuer). This theory is based on the social model of disability which posits that instead of stemming from internal issues within the body, what causes a disability is living in a society that does not account for a person's needs. Essentially, it is the world that is disabling due to ableist norms and expectations. Understanding disabilities in this way is beneficial because it “stifles victim-blaming; it shifts the blame for oppression away from people with disabilities and puts it on social structures, institutions, and other malleable entities” (Krebs). Beyond this emphasis on a social model of disability, McRuer's crip theory suggests that “compulsory able-bodiedness…in a sense produces disability” (McRuer 2). In the same way that recent conversations in queer theory have illuminated compulsory-heterosexuality as a normalizing force for gender and sexuality, crip theory shows that compulsory able-bodiedness, or able-mindedness, is a normative force that constructs social Others.

Adjunct instructors often lack the same resources as their tenured or tenure-track peers, too often finding themselves at an economic and institutional disadvantage. They rarely receive health care or other benefits. They often have no or very limited access to basic teaching resources such as computers, printers, copying facilities or office space for meetings with students; for those who are hoping to obtain a tenure-track position, the
lack of access to research support associated with contingency also prohibits their academic career progression. Finally, they often have little to no institutional protection, as adjunct contracts typically specify that the institution bears no obligation to the instructor, other than to pay them for the course they are being contracted to teach (Toth).

The current trends of the job market for Ph.D.s means that a significant portion of new Ph.D.s, including those with disabilities, will work, at least for some time, as adjunct instructors (Carey, 2020; Hartocollis, 2022). Due to the growing dependency of higher education on contingent and part-time labor, for new doctoral graduates, the tenure track is increasingly out of reach. Additionally, many of those Ph.D.s who do manage to secure a tenure-track job are not guaranteed to do so the semester following their graduation; an alternative scenario is that they could reach the tenure-track after teaching for one or more years as adjunct instructors, but the most likely scary in the current job market is that recent doctoral graduates will not secure a tenure-track job at all. Main et al (2019) report that based on data from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s Graduate Education Survey (GES), nearly half of English PhDs work in non-tenure track academic positions for an average of 2.8 years before starting a tenure-track position. A relatively small percentage (8%) assumed postdoctoral positions as a step toward later obtaining a tenure-track faculty position (Main et al 1314).

In addition to the challenges already faced by adjunct instructors without disabilities, and the challenges faced by tenured or tenure-track instructors with disabilities, adjunct instructors with disability find these challenges magnified. The financial considerations of higher education institutions are often at odds with supplying
resources to the teaching body in general. Adjuncts with disabilities cannot count on the institutions who hire them to supply accommodations, just as they cannot expect them to supply computer time or office space. Given the vulnerability of adjunct positions, instructors with disabilities may be afraid to ask for accommodations and attempt to teach the best they can without them. Jay Dolmage calls for higher education to “think through the academic spaces that we inhabit and build and the bodies that are written and ruled by—and that rewrite—these spaces” (84), encouraging us to focus on how “the ways higher education seeks to change its pedagogical or teaching commitments, and how disability gets figured into this innovation and progress” (97).

Many in the fields of composition and writing studies have come to question strictly medicalized and deficit-based views of disability, recognizing the ways in which disability or impairment is a source of knowledge, insight, and creativity. Work by Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson (2011) and others has explored ways in which the embodied rhetorics of people with intellectual, emotional, or psychiatric disabilities can productively destabilize academic norms. The field of rhetoric and composition is in a unique position to join the rewriting of this narrative by promoting new, inclusive methods of literacy instruction that build upon the knowledge of students' knowledge, experience, and preferred modes of expression, forging a more accessible future in the process.

2.5 Academic Labor and Composition/Rhetoric/Writing Studies

Professional organizations such as the NCTE have supported a number of position statements that while sincere in their intention, primarily cared only for ‘English teachers’
writ large, or addressed surface issues: teaching loads in secondary education (1971), collective bargaining (1972), planning time for English teachers at the elementary and secondary levels (1972, 1977), and what made one qualified to teach English (1979). Mendenhall suggests that, as in many things, these issues were representative of a wider problem at all levels of higher education. But, she says, “The construction of the compositionist after 1970 shifted when English departments entered an era of academic depression…[and] waning financial and ideological support for higher education placed pressure on universities to justify their work” (Mendenhall 18).

At the 1984 NCTE Annual Business Meeting in Detroit, Michigan, representatives passed a resolution calling attention to “the excessive use of part-time English faculty in two- and four year colleges and universities and the unprofessional conditions under which such part-time faculty often work” (National Council for Teachers of English 1984). Emerging out of the 1987 CCCC Annual Convention, the Wyoming Resolution was passed and became, for another two decades, the landmark position statement in issues of academic labor within composition and rhetoric programs. The Wyoming Resolution declares that “the salaries and working conditions of post-secondary teachers with primary responsibility for the teaching of writing are fundamentally unfair as judged by any reasonable professional standards” (Robertson et al 278). The Wyoming Resolution didn't achieve its explicit purposes, even though each of its elements had been a crucial response to its historical moment, and “no longer is the Wyoming Resolution taken as the best strategy in all cases” (Mountford 45). Nonetheless,
it remains an important landmark in the history of composition studies’ relationship with academic labor, in part because it “provided language for persuading the government and the public that connected teachers' working conditions to the quality of education that students receive” (McDonald and Schell 367), but more importantly, because it represented the consensus of a significant portion of the field.

In what some saw as a positive step and others saw as an attempt to “undermin[e] efforts to improve contingent faculty's working conditions” (McDonald and Schell 370), the CCCC’s 1987 *Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing* created the exigence for a national discussion of higher education's exploitation of labor and encouraged a reform movement within academia. Today, the *Statement* exists as one of many position statements by professional associations that try to set standards for working conditions — faculty salaries, benefits, teaching loads, merit raises, class sizes, tenure and promotion criteria — and addresses both the value of tenure-line faculty and the continuing exploitation of others. I have emphasized that these position statements only make an attempt to fix the disparities; it is certainly not through lack of trying, but the fact remains that in the circa twenty five years since Wyoming, the realities of working in college writing programs is not vastly different than it was in the late 80s. Just as the field as a whole continues to struggle to live up to the standards set forth in the *Statement*, “recent WPA scholarship suggests that it also continues to struggle to help WPAs gain the job security and institutional clout needed to advocate for better working conditions and programmatic quality” (Dougherty 93). Twenty years ago, this
reality led the Council of Writing Program Administrators to draft the *Portland Resolution* as a document that would reinforce the Statement.

With each attempt to add clarity to the conversation surrounding writing programs and labor issues, new considerations emerge. The 1991 *Portland Resolution*, for example, drew attention to the position of “the heroic WPA” (Bousquet et al 15), caught between the administrative bourgeoisie and the instructor-class proletariat. As Dougherty indicates, “members of CWPA recognized that more specific protections needed to be drafted to account for the unique circumstances facing untenured faculty working as WPAs. The *Portland Resolution* filled that gap, and was designed to work in lockstep with the *Statement*” (96). For Annica Cox, however, the *Portland Resolution* was another statement that didn’t quite hit the mark, opening up conversations about the true nature of writing programs and their function within the university (50). From the late 90s to the present, issues of academic labor within English departments have changed, reformed, and persisted, despite numerous attempts at reform by CCCC and NCTE.

After the financial collapse of 2008, universities faced “stepped-up austerity measures” (Welch and Scott 4) and while this fiscal emergency was nothing new to composition studies, or indeed English departments in general, this new crisis meant that “composition programs [were] disproportionally responsible for staffing contingent positions” (Fedukovich 40). As the “not separate but certainly unequal” (Crowley 71) partnership of composition and literature continued to shape the labor conditions of English departments in the midst of institutional restructuring, the departmental divide became defined more “by their conditions of labor than their intellectual
On the one hand, the literature specialists of *Composition in the University* recollect Maxine Hairston's "overlords of English", for in both polemics, literary scholars are portrayed as the dominant force in the English department who have, through their "ideology and practices... managed to keep composition in the place they designed for it — at the bottom of the academic pecking order" (Crowley, Composition 120)" (64). Welch and Scott suggest that, "The professional lives of compositionists—whether as contingent teachers or administrators in chronically underfunded introductory writing programs, as faculty on the margins of English departments, or as staff for extradepartmental entities—have long been characterized by making do in institutional borderlands" (5). Where these borderlands exist, and where we draw new boundaries as the conversation moves in difference directions, are still to be seen.

### 2.6 Academic Labor and Unionization

Unionization is often floated as a relatively achievable solution to a number of the labor concerns of university workers. Advocates for labor unions in American higher education point to the success of other trade unions, to the bare-knuckled doggedness with which union representatives fight for the wants and needs of their members. Since unionization is often floated as a catch-all solution to labor concerns within academia, the US Supreme Court's 1980 decision in NLRB v. Yeshiva University dealt a crushing blow that excluding them from the right to unionize under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA).

The restructuring of the neoliberal university has brought on, amongst other changes, a rise of unionization among higher education employees. Kezar et al expand
their argument about the gig academy to claim that increasingly, contingent faculty and other groups of workers face workplace exploitation. These hardships, they suggest, lead to growing support for worker unionization and the emergence of new forms of solidarity among employees. Providing evidence of such growth, it is made clear “that collective actions coordinated through a union model can be a powerful tool for democratizing higher education and better serving postsecondary students and workers of all types” (Kezar et al 142). From this empirical base, particularly its impact, a strong case can be made for unions successfully stemming some of the Gig Academy practices. In reviewing recent statistics on unionization, the authors “review the outcomes or impacts of unionization thus far by looking at early comparative analyses of recent union and nonunion bargaining agreements” (Kezar et al 120). Higher education stakeholders — boards, policymakers, governments, and state systems — should be concerned that employment trends are degrading campuses’ organizational efficiency and effectiveness and work to stem the current employment trends. Administrative actions need to be reversed and rectified.

Although conversations around academic labor indicate a trend towards being “more highly unionized than at any time in history, academic labor has not yet devised a collective strategy to address its own future” (Aronowitz 108). Despite this push towards unionization, Marc Bousquet et al say that labor continues to be rendered invisible in two ways: “First, proposals for reform are often propounded with a seeming blindness to human activity — who will do what, how under what conditions, and with what negotiations among students, teachers, and other actors. Second, mainstream
Composition (again, the field) seems to be remarkably uninformed about organized labor” (84). The way forward for composition teachers is to navigate the contentious spaces of public discourse, engaging in “collective deliberations” about how teaching writing can become re-centered in such a way to make it more rewarding for those investing their labor in it (Bousquet et al 87). Within a capitalist framework, such as the one currently dominating higher education, there is an inherent need for those delivering the product to have an unequivocal say in making decisions.

Existing efforts to mitigate the effects of academic capitalism on labor concerns have predominantly focused on graduate student-led initiatives like unionization and graduate student committees to lead any negotiations. Other efforts have included industrial action, as seen at the end of 2022 when 48,000 workers, including graduate students and instructors, across the University of California system went on strike to negotiate for, amongst other things, “transportation subsidies and pay that matches house costs” (Chan and Rodine). Additional steps that can be taken at a higher level of authority include facilitating graduate student and contingent faculty representation on university boards and committees; while graduate student legislative bodies exist, such as example graduate student councils or graduate student associations, and in places can be extremely effective, creating positions for representatives of marginalized groups within the higher echelons of university administration directly involves them in policy making and discussions of institutional budgets.

Olson (2009) describes shared governance as a process in which various university constituents are consulted and involved in key decisions, and certain
constituent groups are given primary responsibilities over certain areas. The lack of representation and participation in shared university governance is also an issue affecting contingent faculty. A comprehensive study conducted by the AAUP in 2014 determined that 75% of institutions allow full-time non-tenured faculty to participate in governance roles. However, only an estimated 25% of part-time faculty are eligible for such positions. A more recent study of highest research activity universities found that full-time contingent faculty are eligible to participate in governance in 85% of institutions, yet part-time faculty are eligible to serve in 11% of institutions (Jones et al 2017). In addition, 67.9% of senate leaders surveyed in the AAUP study indicated that contingent faculty are barred from certain activities and subcommittees (AAUP, 2014). Another barrier to the inclusion of contingent faculty in governance is the typical lack of compensation for senate appointments. Especially for part-time unsalaried faculty, senate appointments could mean working additional hours without compensation (AAUP, 2014).

Graduate student assistant unionization has become the dominant form of graduate student activism, with union elections, rallies, and demonstrations becoming almost commonplace on university campuses (Newman 103). However, forms of activism that might have been more prevalent in earlier decades no longer seem possible, such as withholding grades or staging walk-outs, in part because the nebulous sense of identity held by a significant number of graduate students presents a challenge to improving their own labor conditions. For Penrose, this uncertain sense of self manifests in “the contrast between the image of educator as collaborative community member and

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7 For case studies on contingent faculty presence in shared governance, see: Field (2018), Street et al (2012), Swidler (2017).
that of isolated autonomous individual suggest[ing] that professional identities are not simply a matter of assigned status or recognition but self-images that influence behavior” (112). One way of becoming secure in their position as both students and teachers is unionization. As Herman and Schmid state, “By unionizing, graduate students are rightfully asserting their identity as crucial academic workers, alongside their more accepted roles as students and professionals” (139). But, as we have seen from recent graduate student union demonstrations, it is not as easy as simply becoming a member of a graduate student union. This is only the first step to addressing the hardships of the working conditions around graduate student labor; “the ongoing challenge…is to forcefully articulate and defend the rights of graduate workers by winning contractual improvements from administrations that continue to resist graduate employees’ collective demands” (Herman and Schmid 139). There is evidence to suggest that the growing support for worker unionization allows new forms of solidarity among employees to emerge. Providing evidence of such growth, recent union efforts make it clear “that collective actions coordinated through a union model can be a powerful tool for democratizing higher education and better serving postsecondary students and workers of all types” (Kezar et al 142).

But, despite the best efforts of those who would position unionization as a silver bullet to the problems of academic capitalism, “unionization only brings into sharper focus the role of the WPA as a middle manager in the university hierarchy” (Mountford 43). In most graduate programs centered in or adjacent to English departments or writing studies, the writing program administrator is likely to act as the direct supervisor for
graduate student assistants. As Bousquet et al suggest, the structures of academic
capitalism frame “the heroic WPA…as playing what Marx identified as the very working-
class role of…the noncommissioned officer, or foreman, the members of the working
class whose particular labor is to directly administer the labor of other members of their
class at the front line of the extraction of surplus value” (Bousquet et al 15). Over the past
few decades, there has been an increase in the extant scholarship on new writing program
administrators, and how, frequently, they have little to no awareness of how to
acknowledge the lived experience of instructors. In the same way that the ‘administrator’
role in other fields — healthcare, for example — has become synonymous with
bureaucracy, so too, in many cases, has writing program administration. As Bousquet et
al ask, “how does the WPA’s right to establish curriculum and set policies square with the
teachers’ right to autonomy over their work?” (28). What happens to the labor practices
of writing programs if their administrators, and the faculty members overseeing graduate
student teaching assistants, are swayed towards increasing class sizes to accommodate
growing freshman cohorts?

This concern echoes that of Bousquet (2008), Mendenhall (2014) and Welch and
Scott (2016), who all argue that the nature of graduate education has moved from an
emphasis on learning and knowledge, to an emphasis on productivity, output, and
research, all of which can be turned by the institution into financial gain. The ‘marketable
skills’ that any graduate student is expected to have by the time they attempt to enter the
job market far exceeds what is reasonable, and frankly, what a graduate student has time
for (Probulus). Underlying this transition is a concept that underpins many academic labor concerns in American higher education: emotional labor.

2.7 Emotional Labor

Emotional labor means the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for wage and therefore has exchange value (Hochschild 7). Because it has wage value, it is easily exploited, particularly in academies where our very roles demand emotional investment. Emotional labor is also uncompensated. In particular, recent conversations about emotional labor have focused on the link between emotional labor and the job responsibilities of those that work in higher education. Several articles discuss how jobs that expect emotional labor — such as university instructors, professors, and faculty — often never expressly state that they needed emotional labor (Shayne). Of the responsibilities of instructors, including tenured faculty, contingent faculty, and graduate students, work is often broken down into four categories: teaching, service, research, and administration. Teaching and service are predominantly the two aspects of the job that require the most emotional labor (Bellas).

Teaching requires a lot of emotional labor, particularly for graduate student instructors who are both students and teachers. As instructors, graduate students are expected to not only “perform well”, but also to try and manage both their own emotions and manage the emotions of their students (Mahoney et al.). This has been more evident over the past year during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the emotional care that instructors do, most of the emotional labor that instructors do concerning students lay in the teaching, grading, and advising parts of their job. The main way emotional labor
manifests in response to the burden of grading is when dealing with students who are unhappy with their grades, or concerned that one less-than-stellar assignment or skipped class might affect their grade. For graduate student instructors, this work is two-fold: on one hand, they have a responsibility to uphold the grading protocols of their department, but on the other, the concern with grades and their significance perhaps holds more weight, making it a familiar anxiety for graduate student instructors navigating that alongside their students.

Many graduate student assistants are involved in time-consuming unremunerated labor such as performing psychological counseling for undergraduate students on behalf of the university as part of a departmental ‘apprenticeship’ (Herman and Schmid 118). Just as contingent faculty face concern over annual review — which may be the deciding factor in whether they have their teaching contracts renewed — graduate student assistants often feel that this labor is essential to their professional development. The invisibility of this labor is, in many ways, connected to invisible disabilities. For authors Brown and Leigh, “Declaring a disability, chronic illness or neurodiversity is not only a matter of succumbing to social oppression and control” (986). If we reject ableism, they suggest, then we also reject the principle of disclosure. But the realities of higher education often make this difficult. Brown and Leigh add that academia, “prides itself for research activity, teaching excellence, knowledge exchanges and transfers. In this working environment, overwork is normalized. Scholarly contributions and institutional citizenship are so prized that holidays and sick leave are minimized, if not avoided. Therefore, people feel they cannot be honest about their issues or health concerns and
keep them secret” (987). For early career academics, particularly graduate students, the stigma attached to disability and mental health frequently discourages them from being open about their conditions.

The forced invisibility of graduate student labor contributes to the high levels of stress, fatigue, anxiety, and emotional burnout documented amongst populations of graduate students. While there is a large amount of recent scholarship on graduate student labor and stress, particularly in light of the ongoing pandemic and the changes to learning it necessitated, what has yet to be acknowledged is that both of these things (labor and stress) are directly exacerbated by the commodification of the university. Main et al suggest that, “It is important to learn about the experiences of doctoral students on their journey to obtain the degree so as to enhance and streamline the process of studying towards the doctoral degree and promote it as a positive experience in the eyes of those experiencing it” (1314). Further, I suggest that one way of enhancing and streamlining graduate studies period is to acknowledge the emotional labor of its students, starting with support from faculty and administrative staff. Graduate students are already in precarious positions when it comes to labor exploitation, more so for graduate students of color and other minority graduate students. I argue that in addition to the graduate student labor exploitation that we are aware of — a mismatch between hours worked and hours paid, for example — that emotional labor exploitation is an increasing trend in graduate education, one that may have significant implications for the future of graduate programs in general. Given the interrelation of exploitation and power dynamics, emotional labor exploitation is almost always perpetrated by faculty members, specifically tenured
professors, on graduate students. In a 2018 blog post, Drew Daniel writes that, “From top to bottom, precarious labor conditions enable abuse: graduate students who have a conflict with a professor are very likely to feel that they can’t afford to speak up because they don’t want to lose what is already a slim chance against the job market’s long odds by arguing with a potentially well-connected and hostile antagonist”. Nicole A. Cooke (2019) states that forms of emotional abuse, which she calls “impolite hostilities”, disproportionately affect marginalized groups within academia, especially those for whom oppression is an intersectional concern (223).

Emotional labor has always been a gendered exercise. The Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group at the University of Oregon found in a 2017 survey that overall, women do more work-teaching, work-service, and work-advising. Karen Cardozo (2017) frames academic labor within the dialog of “care work” (405), drawing on gendered labor in other fields such as healthcare via an anti-neoliberal and feminist lens. For Cardozo, college teaching is care work, “not only because it develops human capabilities or because faculty may develop emotional attachments to their students, but also because the creation of a devalued teaching class is consistent with the social construction of caring labor historically” (407). Cardozo draws a Marxist feminist distinction between production and reproduction, highlighting how this difference reinforces gender disparities already present in academic labor. These gender disparities take the form of female instructors and faculty performing more of the ‘care work’, but
simultaneously being at a disadvantage in terms of having a voice within a department or institutional unit.

Within writing studies specifically, encompassing both composition and rhetoric, care work becomes more of a factor in labor concerns, if only because of the small class sizes. In the 2015 revised position statement *Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing*, the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) recommend that “No more than 20 students should be permitted in any writing class. Ideally, classes should be limited to 15” (“Postsecondary”). Smaller class sizes are going to lead to more interpersonal interactions between an instructor and a student, necessarily requiring more care work to see that the student’s educational needs are being met. According to Hochschild (1983), work that entails emotional labor requires face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact, the production of an emotional state in another person, and the exercise of a degree of control over emotional activities. By the nature of the content a writing class should cover, it demands an emotional response — the subjectivity of close reading, for example. Additionally, as I have learned from my own experiences, for many college freshman, their core curriculum writing class might be the only class in which the instructor knows their name. A professor teaching a higher level Classics course might have over 100 students; it would be impossible to build relationships with each student. A college freshman seeking advice might naturally gravitate towards an instructor who can identify them by name. If graduate student teaching assistants and contingent instructors

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8 See the NCTE *Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing* (2015); the Council of Writing Program Administrator’s (CWPA) *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (2011); and the CWPA’s *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition* (2014) for further discussion on postsecondary writing instruction curricula.
are doing the bulk of the teaching of postsecondary writing, then it also stands to reason that they are equally performing more of the emotional labor needed to ensure student success. While recent efforts have attempted to acknowledge the emotional burden that first-year writing and composition-rhetoric imposes on those who teach it, graduate students and contingent laborers for whom the professional identity might be an elusive concept still carry the burden of emotional labor, and may be prevented from other types of labor such as seeking out professional development opportunities (Cardozo 409).

2.8 Graduate Student Labor

This project is primarily concerned with the labor of graduate student assistants. Even though progress has been made in addressing labor concerns within higher education, and even taking into consideration the field-specific changes that have taken place within composition and rhetoric, and writing studies, a gap in the literature still exists that falls short of recognizing that the graduate student assistants are a distinct group of workers who have a set of considerations that are not necessarily identical to other groups. Instead, they are consumed into the conversations around contingent labor. In the same way that graduate students and undergraduate students are not the same, I feel that it is a disservice to both contingent workers and graduate student assistants to treat them as a single homologous group. I think it also stands to reason that graduate education — the taking of graduate-level classes — is a perfect environment for teaching new instructors or potential tenure-track or non-tenure track instructors about the perils and pitfalls of working in the contemporary American university. While the problems faced by graduate students as a major part of the academic workforce are certainly not
unique — in fact, the problems of contingent faculty overlap considerably with the concerns of graduate student laborers — it is my hope that considering the plight of graduate students also supplements the conversations about contingent and adjunct labor by establishing that despite the shared concerns, lumping these groups together under the banner of ‘contingent workers’ does nothing but add another level of exploitation.

Consolidating the two groups of workers undermines the intricacies and experiences that influence individual choices within the structures of higher education. As Eileen Schell and her co-authors (2014) suggest, there is an urgent need to address all issues of academic labor, or there may not be 'work' to be done in the future. In the same text, Schell et al argue that “we all ought to pay more attention to the fundamental shifts in higher education and do something before all of our jobs are at stake”, describing that because of their inexperience in being department citizens and advocates for their own professional identities, “graduate students stay quiet about academic labor conditions and [victims of] the problems that that silence creates” (5).

In 1980, following months of institutional debate, the Faculty Association at Yeshiva University in New York filed a request with the National Labor Relations Board to be designated as the official bargaining agent for teaching and professorial staff. The Yeshiva University Faculty Association was already a labor union, and argued that they, the Faculty Association, should be considered ‘employees’ and not ‘managers’, therefore entitling them to certain rights and protections under the National Labor Relations Act (NRLA) 1935 (Baldwin 152). The Faculty Association contended that the scope of what they realistically had authority over did not classify them as ‘managers’. When the
Supreme Court ruled in favor of university management and supported the claim that faculty were, in fact, managers rather than employees therefore not entitled to NLRA protections, perhaps they had not quite anticipated the trickle-down effect such a ruling would have. In 2004, the National Labor Relations Board reinforced the Yeshiva decision in the Brown University case, finding that graduate student assistants were not employees within the meaning of Section 2(3) of the NRLA. The Brown University Board’s decision, in turn, deprived an entire category of workers of the protections of the Act, without a convincing justification in either the statutory language or the policies of the Act. The Brown University Board held that graduate assistants cannot be employees because they are, primarily, students and therefore have a predominantly educational, not economic, relationship with their university. Recent evidence would suggest that this is not the case, and in a 2016 review of the Brown University suit, the National Labor Relations Board agreed; they overturned the Brown University decision, claiming that “The Board has the statutory authority to treat student assistants as statutory employees, where they perform work, at the direction of the university, for which they are compensated” (National Labor Relations Board, 1-2).

If even tenured faculty object to a failure of the system to catch them under the NLRA umbrella as in Yeshiva, what, then, does that mean for those at the bottom of the ladder? When supervisors and administrative superiors — in position, not necessarily in morals — are considered managers, then those without the securities offered by tenure or

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9 It is important to note here that the Yeshiva decision applied only to tenure-track and tenured faculty at private universities; in some ways more damaging to academic labor activism, the NLRB’s finding against Brown, and later Columbia and Yale, graduate student efforts, was also limited to private universities.
other permanent employment should be considered employees. It is easier to accept the
premise that in the “managed university” (Bousquet et al, 2003), graduate students seem
to have been designated to a category that is neither employee, manager, nor simply
student, despite what the above rulings might suggest. The failing of institutions to
recognize graduate student labor as work forces the conversations to turn again, more
directly, to graduate students as an important, if overlooked, group of workers. As
Herman and Schmid so succinctly put it: “If you work, you are an employee” (153). What
they did not add is the caveat: unless you are a graduate student, or unless you attend a
state-run institution, or unless...the list goes on.

On the (mis)identification of graduate student assistants, and drawing on the
conversation around who ‘works’, Marc Bousquet (2008) suggests that this has been an
ongoing battle for recognition that has stretched over decades. He cites the examples of
success, at the Universities of California and Illinois, but also highlights that graduate
students at some institutions are still continuing the effort, such as the graduate student
bodies at Yale and NYU. This confusion, Bousquet suggests, has “created a situation
advantageous to the employer” in which, for all intents and purposes, graduate
employees have all of the responsibilities of labor, often having teaching loads greater
than their own professors, in addition to “an employment contract, supervision, job
training, a taxable wage, and so on” (Bousquet 68). While this might be a positive
outcome for the employers, in this case the institution who can cut expenditures by
reducing the tenure-track related salaries, these graduate employees are not extended the
same protections as the regular workforce. Bousquet highlights some of these absent protections:

“...graduate employees are generally ineligible for unemployment benefits, and unlike regular workers they can be compelled to pay tuition for their on-the-job training; shoulder job-related expenses, including the production of course-related materials; supplement a sub-living wage with unforgivable debt; and engage in various forms of unpaid labor (in keeping with various ideologies of “apprenticeship,” “mentoring,” and “professionalism,” even though for most the term of mentor-ing and apprenticeship will not lead to professional employment). Nor can a graduate employee who doesn’t like his or her working conditions quit the employer and go to an alternative employer in the usual fashion: students who are unable to live on their stipends cannot easily move to a higher-paying program, and those who are not economically situated to take on debt to finish their degrees on the gamble of winning a professorial job are likely to quit rather than change programs” (68).

Gregory and Winn suggest that in a survey of recent literature, they found that the “biggest challenge for contemporary academics seems to be negotiating their academic identities with interpretations of what constitutes academic work” (5). Building on their acknowledgment of the struggle in affirming academic identities, I hope to shine light on the nebulous collection of labels, and identities, that graduate students deal with. To put it another way, where does the conversation around graduate academic labor go if we readjust our ways of thinking about which label to apply to this group of workers? Does
the conversation change if we talk about employee rights vs. student rights? Yes. Is that change always a good one? Not necessarily. The terminology used when talking about graduate labor is perhaps tied to a number of the existing problems in academia. This seems like an important disjunction to try and reconcile, and it seems that for academic labor scholars, one avenue of research that may be opening up is the extent to which our academic identities are interconnected with how we think about academic labor, especially concerning graduate students.

In a 2011 article, Amy Pason explores four myths about academic labor: “(1) our labor market operates with fair supply-demand logics; (2) our success is defined by an achievable promotional ladder; (3) the liberal arts are not as valuable as other fields; and (4) academic work is not the same as other labor” (1786). Pason’s second assumption, that the corporatization of higher education has subsequently resulted in the perceived ability to move ‘up’, highlights a potential downside: that there is, or seems to be, a promotional ladder. While graduate students may not be endowed with the same entitlements as other employees, or at state institutions may not even be classified as such, the structure of academia and higher education is set up to encourage graduate students to act as employees. The system has established within itself a ladder of progression by which only those who ‘do’ the most are able to push forward, much like the promotional structure at any white-collar industry. The fallacy that the neoliberal job market has created an internal rewards system within higher education itself instills in its workers a particular ‘working identity’. For graduate students, it can be difficult to cement
this working identity simply because of the multiple roles the inhabit. Pason suggests that, “Convincing ourselves we are workers is a challenge in itself because many of us switch from identity to identity based on the nature of our work. Sometimes we see ourselves as students gaining an education. Sometimes we see ourselves as teachers belonging to a community of other communication instructors. Sometimes we see ourselves as researchers contributing to our wider academic discipline” (1791). The ‘working identity’ nurtured by the system manifests itself as multiple kinds of labor, both visible and invisible. For all intents and purposes, graduate students are employees, except for when the university needs to classify them as students.

Newman suggests that this working identity, particularly the identity of graduate students, is complicated by false or exaggerated representations of ‘the graduate student’ in mass media: “As graduate students have been appearing with greater frequency and prominence in popular culture,” he writes, “they have simultaneously been appearing with greater frequency and prominence on college campuses, demanding, among other things, better pay and more power” (98). But, Newman adds, despite the best efforts of the graduate student body to co-opt their presumed notoriety, attributed in part to representations of graduate school in popular culture, for greater control over university decisions that affect their lives, it hasn’t been as successful as they would have liked. While not a complete failure, “University officials, undergraduates, and faculty have used the dominant (and negative) cultural images of graduate students to discredit their attempts to gain greater political force within the university” (Newman 98-99). Media portrayals of graduate students, which Newman says reflect negatively on the real work
of graduate study, undermine the work being done by and for graduate students to enhance, or at the very least secure, their political representation within the university structure. On the question of why such representations are politically dangerous, Newman suggests that “graduate school is the place of domestic reproduction within the academy — the institution through which the university itself is reproduced” (102).

Many institutions specify that those holding graduate assistantships may not work more than 20 hours per week because the focus of graduate students should be on their own studies, with teaching a complement to classroom learning. Being restricted to working only 20 hours per week often has severe consequences, especially when we consider that the average graduate assistant salary is less than $14,000 per year (Brown et al 337). Universities sometimes expect their full-time tenured professors to have side gigs such as consulting and advisory work, paid research, Board positions, and speaking engagements, to elevate their brand and augment their income. Where it’s not expected, per se, it would very likely be allowed. Even among traditional liberal arts professors of English and History, for example, writing books, contributing to literary and popular magazines, and speaking are popular, and paid, side gigs. Graduate students are unable — at the risk of potentially jeopardizing their assistantships or degree progress — to pick up additional work outside of the university to supplement an income that is barely above the poverty line for a single person household.

Within the embedded ivory tower narratives of the capitalist academy, American universities find themselves facing a dilemma where graduate students are concerned. On one hand, if graduate students are only students, universities have to justify the presence
of tuition abatements or tuition-free learning for enrolled graduate students, in addition to explaining why graduate students often receive a stipend too. On the other hand, if universities explain that graduate students earn tuition abatements and other financial benefits because they do extra work — namely teaching — then they equally have to admit that graduate students do the bulk of the intensive one-on-one teaching in the modern university (Newman 106). In this institution, they are not only students. Moreover, the bargaining authority that comes with being classed as a teacher or an employee seems to far outweigh the graduate student experience: “Graduate students do not have even the limited assembly power of professors, or the potential earning power (and thus the potential alumni-donating power) of undergraduates” (Newman 106).

2.9 Summary

Ultimately, there is not a simple solution to the problems explored above. For graduate students, they are also cursed with the burden of becoming the next generation of writing instructors, for whom the job market looks dire, and for whom contingent work after graduate study may be the only option. It is in their best interests to being learning about academic labor during their graduate study, if only so that the precarious positions they may well find themselves in don’t come as a surprise. Despite the picture of despondency it may seem like I’ve painted above, my expectation is that the results will show some hope for the near future. I anticipate an increasing level of student activism among the participants in this survey, and my suspicion is that the current graduate student assistant body with writing studies and composition know full well that the core
of the problem is bigger than any one department. It is not a problem that graduate student workers feel is made worse by department administrators and faculty.

From the review of the literature, I take three facts as the underlying premises for this research: first, composition’s complicated history with academic labor studies represents broader, more universal issues within American higher education. Second, graduate student labor is an increasingly important element of the wider discussion of academic labor concerns, if only because a number of graduate students will go on to work in higher education, in various roles, and should know how to avoid perpetuating problematic working conditions. Finally, there is no quick fix or silver bullet that can fix all of the flaws in the American university. Continued efforts consistently require recalibration and redirection to ensure they are meeting the needs of the entire academic workforce. The research survey that provides the core data for this project only looks at graduate student teaching assistants. As outlined above, it is not to suggest that adjuncts and contingent workers are not important — in fact, I believe the opposite — or that they have a different set of labor concerns. Instead, it’s to say that there is significant overlap in the conversation about both groups of workers, but my own personal investment is as a graduate student who wants to see change in the labor conditions of our employment. Additionally, if the number of graduate students who are eligible to teach undergraduate writing courses declines, it may result in an increased labor burden on adjuncts and other contingent workers. While I do stand by the claim that graduate student assistants should not be thought of as contingent, there are a number of shared concerns, and investing in research into graduate student experiences with academic labor may just prevent an
increasingly dire situation for adjuncts and contingent faculty. The graduate assistant experience is relatively undervalued within the context of higher education in the United States, due primarily to the changing structures of the academy.

Where this chapter provides an overview of the literature surrounding the topic, Chapter III presents my research methods and methodologies. After stating the research questions and hypotheses, the following chapter will discuss the procedures followed, the participants, and the survey questions used to develop theory on the labor concerns of graduate student teaching assistants working in writing programs.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND METHODOLOGIES

3.1 Introduction to Research Design and Methods

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this quantitative study regarding the overall levels of satisfaction amongst graduate student assistants working in writing programs across the United States. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of how graduate assistants experience issues surrounding academic labor, particularly their own, and provided a way to develop a number of proposed solutions from the data in order to suggest improved practices for future generations of workers.

The applicability of grounded theory and a constructivist approach for this study are discussed at length in this chapter. Hammersley (2013) makes note of the ‘critical’ tradition in qualitative research, in which situations are observed and interpreted through wide-angle lenses that focus on the multiplicity of interconnected factors that have an impact on a situation, “utilizing ideology critique with an interest in emancipation from oppression, exploitation, inequality, power and powerlessness, and un-freedoms”, or in other words, “research with an overtly political intent to expose the deforming interests (ideologies) at work in a situation and to bring about a more just society” (29-34). Because any conversations about labor are inherently political, in addition to the
connections between education and social justice, the critical tradition is an appropriate choice for this research. The general goal of critical theory is to enlighten the general public on the issues that can cause alienation and unequal opportunities within a population (Marinopolou 134). By drawing attention to the unbalanced nature of the practice, critical theory hopes that amended behaviors can correct the unbalanced systems that favor certain groups of people. The research plan, including the methodology, study participants, procedures, analysis method, limitations, and ethical concerns are also primary components of this chapter.

This study sought to build a theory in answer to the following research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: What are the labor concerns of graduate student teaching assistants working in writing programs?

RQ2: How are these connected to the material and financial resources offered by the institution?

3.2 Methodologies

A qualitative study is appropriate when the goal of research is to explain a phenomenon by relying on the perception of a person’s experience in a given situation (Stake, 2010). As outlined by Creswell (2003), a quantitative study is appropriate when the goal of research is to understand relationships between variables, but to also make general claims about the state of being within external structures. Because of the ethical considerations, as explored later in this chapter, and because the primary purpose of this
study was to gather numerical data in the form of statistics, a quantitative approach was the most appropriate choice.

**Grounded Theory Methodology**

Since Glaser and Strauss (1967) invented the term “grounded theory,” there have been debates about what grounded theory is and what its components are. They emphasized that grounded theory is used to explicate causes, conditions, contexts, contingencies, consequences, and covariances, which are components of social processes. More recently, a conflict has arisen around what assumptions grounded theory makes. As a result of this conflict, two new threads of investigative methods emerged: objectivist grounded theory, developed by Corbin and Strauss (1990), and constructivist grounded theory, detailed extensively by Charmaz (2008; 2014). This study was performed using grounded theory methodology, which “is a respected way of moving from individual knowledge to collective knowledge” (Stake 17). Birks and Mills (2011) and Charmaz described the positivist philosophical position as a view that comes from the human experience with complete objectivity, understanding a human’s perception is imperfect. Charmaz’s adoption of grounded theory in research design draws tighter connections between a constructivist epistemology and ontology by encouraging researchers to “[place] priority on the phenomena of study and [see] both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships” (330).
**Naturalistic Constructivism Methodology**

Johanek (2000) advocates for a “contextualist paradigm” rooted in methodological pragmatism, suggesting that given the fluid and often messy nature of writing studies research, researchers need to be flexible in the methods they choose. The main kinds of naturalistic enquiry include case studies, ethnographic studies, comparative studies, grounded theory, and phenomenological studies (Arsenault and Anderson, 1998; Flick, 2004a, 2004b, 2009). Guba and Lincoln (1998) state that constructivist research is relativist, transactional, and subjectivist. Adopting a relativist stance means that “there is no objective truth to be known” (Hugly and Sayward 278) and emphasizes the diversity of interpretations that can be applied to the world. Transactional means that truth arises from interactions between elements of what James Berlin calls “the rhetorical situation” (1987) and is therefore the product of interactions and individual thoughts. Subjectivist research posits that the world is made of ‘constructed realities’, and, as a result, is open to individual interpretation.

The research design adopted in this study is primarily influenced by Guba and Lincoln's conception of naturalistic inquiry as a form of constructivism (1985; 1998), and to a lesser extent, Charmaz' constructivist conception of grounded theory (2006). The epistemology adopted for this particular research project is a hybrid constructivist-interpretivist epistemology, grounded in two core beliefs: first, that this research can benefit from elements of a relativist ontology due to the perception that reality is subjective and based on understandings and meanings developed through social
interaction (Maxwell 67); and second, that people cannot be separated from their knowledge. Rather than taking a positivist approach, this research seeks to understand the connections between graduate students and academic labor, and to provide statistical data that can be used as evidential support of this connection.

3.3 Study Design

The Researcher

I have worked in English studies and writing studies for 8 years and hold a Bachelor of Arts with Honors in International Politics, and a Master of Arts in English. There was no preexisting relationship between myself or any participant that represented a conflict of interest, such as a reporting relationship, contract, or any relationship with that may otherwise have imparted bias on the research study. While a section of the participant pool was taken from my home institution, and my colleagues were solicited as potential respondents, the design of the survey prevented any identification of which responses might belong to respondents with whom I am familiar.

Study Participants

The sample was drawn from a population of graduate students aged 18 or above who attend a higher education institution in the United States. The eligibility criteria stated that eligible participants must be employed as a graduate assistant in a writing program at their institution. The first page of the survey asked participants to determine their eligibility for participation in this study; answers that indicated undergraduate student status, graduate students without assistantships, or enrollment at an institution not within the predefined region were removed from the data pool. Participants could be
working full- or part-time, and there was no upper age limitation. All participants had to be fluent in the English language, but English did not have to be their native language.

Participants were recruited through my existing professional networks. Contacts in my professional network were emailed using the Email to Potential Participants in Appendix A and asked for participants that fit the eligibility criteria. nextGEN, WPA-GO, Writing Studies-L, and WCenter were also contacted via email to request assistance from these organizations with distributing the Email to Potential Participants in Appendix A to their members. These organizations were selected due to the proximity of their members to the target population and their relationship to writing studies, and composition and rhetoric, despite me not currently being a member or active participant within them.

Other recruitment mechanisms included posting to social media forums such as the Reddit channels r/GradSchool and r/WPAannouncements, and my own Twitter profile.

Ethics remained a top priority throughout the study. Following the methods as outlined in this chapter was paramount in ensuring the validity and reliability of the study. The risks to human subjects associated with this study were minimal. All participants were over 18 years of age, and did not demonstrate any impaired mental capacity, as determined by their ability to perform the positions that they hold in the workplace. Meeting these criteria qualified them as participants in this study. Additionally, all recorded materials will be erased after 5 years, following final approval by the research committee, minimizing any future risks related to confidentiality.
Data Collection

This study used a survey method, found in Appendix B, in the form of an online questionnaire. This method was chosen in order to gather a large sample of data while allowing members of the sample group to remain anonymous. The survey was created using a premium version of Qualtrics XM obtained through the University of South Carolina. The survey was made ‘live’ on August 15th 2022 and the first round of distribution was immediately undertaken. At this time, the UofSC English Department administrator, nextGEN on Twitter, the WAC Clearinghouse, and Douglas Hesse at the University of Denver were contacted. Hesse was contacted due to his extensive experience within the field of composition, having served as founding Executive Director of the Writing Program at the University of Denver. He is a former President of the National Council of Teachers of English, former Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and former President of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, therefore had access to an extensive network of potential participants. At this time, my own Twitter account was also utilized for survey distribution.

Graduate student representatives for the associated programs were contacted at NC State University and Clemson University on September 6th 2022 for a second distribution, as well as posting on the r/WPAannouncements Reddit channel. For the third round of distribution, the coordinators of the WPA-GO listserv, and department chairs of associated programs at Purdue University, University of Texas Austin, University of California Davis, University of Massachusetts Amherst, and the University of Nevada
Reno were emailed on October 21st 2022. These institutions were selected due to familiarity with key figures or faculty members in a related program. On December 8th 2022, an email was sent to contacts at institutions listed on the Rhetoric Society of America’s list of graduate programs in rhetoric and composition and associated fields. To ensure that I was contacting the correct people, I researched each program and identified either the graduate student coordinator, department chair, or graduate student director listed on each program’s official webpage.

A blanket email (see Appendix A) was sent to program contacts at Arizona State University, Auburn University, Ball State University, Bowling Green State University, City College New York (CUNY), and Colorado State University. At this time, the WritingStudies-L email list as also utilized. To undertake a fifth round of survey distribution using the same RSA list, the aforementioned blanket email was sent to program contacts at DePaul University, Duke University, Duquesne University, Florida State University, George Mason University, Georgia State University, the University of Indiana, Illinois State University, and Iowa State University. On December 13th 2022, the sixth round of survey distribution was started using the same RSA list, sending the aforementioned blanket email to program contacts at James Madison University, Louisiana State University, Miami Ohio University, Michigan State University, North Dakota State University, Northern Arizona State University, Northwestern University, the University of Ohio, Oklahoma State University, and Oregon State University. The penultimate round of distribution took place on December 28th 2022. Emails were sent to program contacts at Purdue University, San Diego State University, Syracuse University,
Texas Christian University, Texas State University, Texas Tech University, the University of Alabama, the University of Arizona, the University of California Berkeley, the University of California Irvine, the University of Central Florida, the University of Hawaii Manoa, the University of Illinois Chicago, the University of Kansas, and the University of Louisville. On January 2nd 2023, the final round of emails were sent to program contacts at the University of Maryland College Park, the University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina Greensboro, the University of Texas El Paso, the University of Utah, the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, the University of Wisconsin Madison, Virginia Tech University, Washington State University, and Wayne State University. The survey was closed on January 13th 2023. The field period for the survey was August 15th 2022 to January 13th 2023.

Questions on the survey were answered either with a 'yes/no' binary choice; answered on a five-point Likert scale selecting from a range of answers; answered by selecting multiple answers; or were open-ended questions that required participants to provide brief text-based responses in their own words. These responses were then coded to facilitate further analysis and identify trends. The questionnaire was separated into six sections: Determining Eligibility Criteria, General Assistantship Questions, Institution Financial and Material Support, Graduate Student Labor, Determining Overall Graduate Student Satisfaction, and Participant Demographic Data Collection. The full survey can be found in Appendix B.

In Determining Eligibility Criteria, participants were asked questions such as 'Are you a graduate student?' , 'Where is your institution located?' , 'Do you currently work in
the Department of English?’, and ‘Do you have a graduate assistantship?’. These questions were designed to determine whether participants were eligible to be included in this particular study; answers that indicated they were not graduate students or did not have a graduate assistantship will be removed from the data pool. Questions in General Assistantship Questions will include ‘What kind of graduate assistantship do you have?’, ‘How many contracted hours per week is your assistantship?’, ‘What kind of institution do you attend?’, and ‘Do you teach a course that is part of a first year sequence?’. These questions provided additional information on the work that graduate assistants are asked to do, further supporting the investigation into graduate labor concerns.

Institution Financial and Material Support asked participants to identify the different kinds of support offered by their institutions and departments, including stipends, other financial benefits, and material support such as office space and teaching supplies. Participants were asked to select all answers that apply. In this section, questions also asked participants to respond in their own words about how accessible these resources are.

In the survey section on Graduate Student Labor, questions were asked regarding labor conditions in the participants’ programs and departments, such as ‘If you have a teaching assistantship, how many courses are you expected to teach per academic year?’ and ‘How many hours per week do you actually spend as part of your assistantship, including time spent preparing for the work you have to do?’. These questions were intended to support the claim that the number of hours actually worked by graduate
student instructors is often more than the number of hours for which they are contracted and paid. Additionally, I included in this section questions about emotional labor and whether participants consider emotional labor part of the work they do.

The next survey section, Determining Overall Graduate Student Satisfaction, asked participants to react to questions about their overall feelings on a five-point Likert scale. A Likert scale provides a range of responses to a given question or statement, for example: Very Satisfied, Satisfied, Neither Satisfied or Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Very Dissatisfied (Cohen et al 480). This is the instrument that was used in this section of the survey.

By the nature of the survey completion being voluntary, informed consent was implied in all responses recorded. Answers to the questions in the Participant Demographic Data Collection section were not required or made compulsory responses, given that such answers are tangential to the proposed research questions. However, the results of this section were used as supplementary data to reinforce the analysis of the results and the discussion that followed. Further study may include a more detailed analysis of the received demographic information to assess whether social factors such as race, gender, or disability status contribute anything to the conclusions reached in the present study.

Procedures Followed

Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was sought from the University of South Carolina. Once approval was given, existing professional contacts were emailed using the Email to Potential Participants (see Appendix A). Potential
participants were screened using eligibility-determining questions at the beginning of the survey; any responses that indicated ineligibility according to the predetermined criteria were unable to complete the full survey, and these responses were removed from the data pool.

Grounded theory allows for discovering the phenomenon during the research process (Charmaz, 2006). Because the theory or phenomenon emerges from the data, it is possible that some elects of the forthcoming discussion center around topics not addressed specifically by the survey questions as laid out in Appendix B. At any time during the survey, the participants had the option to leave without submitting their responses. Given the focus of this research on graduate student labor and associated concerns, incomplete survey responses were included in the data pool so as not to undermine the time participants spent responding to the survey questions.

Interim data analysis occurred on multiple occasions through the length of time the survey was open. Small samples of the existing results were examined, and brief notes on the data were made as it was presented in its raw form, without further intervention to assist in developing the coding scheme. This memo writing and constant analysis help minimize bias, because both activities are reflective, which aids objectivity throughout the study (Birks and Mills). Notes or memos in particular remind the researcher of their thoughts and help them to separate thoughts that the researcher might impose on the theory versus theory that emerges from the data. In this research, memos included topics such as thoughts or concerns related to the study, reflections on the quality of the process, and thoughts on emerging trends and themes.
3.4 Overview of Data Collected

A total of 129 responses were collected between August 15th 2022 and January 13th 2023. From these responses, 22 were removed from the data pool due to ineligible participants. As stated in Chapter IV, these responses were deemed as ineligible for one of the following reasons: a) participants did not live and work in the United States; b) participants were not graduate students; c) participants did not currently work in a writing program or writing center; or d) participants did not currently hold at least one graduate assistantship.

The data was stored on a personal laptop computer, which was password protected and secured at all times. The personal laptop computer was kept in a locked office, on my person, or at my home address where it was securely monitored. In addition to the data being stored on a personal laptop computer, it was also stored in a password protected Qualtrics account. The data gathered was anonymous, meaning that participants were unable to be identified. Information obtained during this research study remained confidential. No personal information was collected that could lead to participant identification, or the identification of any institution associated. The questions in the Participant Demographic Data Collection section of the survey were voluntary and gathered for potential use in further research. Results of this research study may be published or presented at seminars; however, the report(s) or presentation(s) will not include any identifying information.
3.5 Assumptions and Limitations

The following assumptions were present in this study:

1. It is assumed that survey participants in this study were not deceptive with their answers, and that the participants answered questions honestly and to the best of their ability. Since the data was anonymous and self-reported, the researcher assumes that in this study, anonymity strongly increases the likelihood of authentic responses.

2. It is assumed that this study is an accurate representation of the current situation in the field of writing studies in higher education across the United States. While only exploring the concerns of graduate student teaching assistants in one field of study, the literature review establishes composition studies as representative of academic labor concerns on the whole.

A number of limitations have been identified in the research design, despite the researcher undertaking measures to reduce the impact of these on the gathered data. The first limitation of this research surrounds the dissemination of the survey. The primary goal of this research is to illustrate the labor conditions of graduate students in writing programs. It is anticipated that some of the results will reflect negatively on those programs and institutions. By using department chairs or other prominent figures within a department as one method of distributing the survey to graduate student teaching assistants, it may have had a negative effect on the willingness of those students to participate in the survey. Approaching key figures also might have led to skewed data; in places where the survey link was distributed by a program contact, this may have led to
more data gathered from that institution when compared to a program where the survey was not distributed internally, but participants encountered the survey link through an external source such as Reddit or Twitter.

As Seidman writes, “In any hierarchical school system…in which a principal has hiring and firing power and control over other working conditions, a teacher…may not feel free to talk openly” (41). Similarly, involving departmental leads and providing participants with the knowledge that the department chair is aware of the ongoing attempts at data collection (via distributing the survey) may have influenced participants’ belief that their participation will be free of consequences, even if there was a guarantee of complete anonymity when completing the survey. Not using the department chair, or other senior members of the department, as the initial point of contact may in turn have limited the dissemination of the survey and restricted the amount of data gathered. On the other hand, because this research examines experiences that take place at a number of institutions, it may not have been necessary to seek access through an authority (Seidman 44).

Likewise, this research design relied on self-reported data. In both quantitative survey research and qualitative analysis, the researcher relies on respondents’ ability to accurately and honestly recall details about their lives, circumstances, thoughts, opinions, or behaviors. The practices reported in interviews might have been influenced by recollection bias and/or the temptation to offer desirable answers (Cohen et al 339). Conversely, this research considers the possibility that some participants may have a
sense of loyalty to their institutions and were therefore reluctant to be completely truthful in their responses.

The final limitation that has already been identified is researcher bias. As part of the community being studied, parts of my own scholarly identity and personal experiences were useful. This could negatively effect the interpretation and analysis of the results. For example, my experiences as an international student add considerations that are not necessarily applicable to the majority of graduate student assistants. Additionally, I actively tried to avoid what Moss explains as “the tendency to rely on their own knowledge” to supplement data (Moss 167). Maxwell writes that, “research is primarily concerned with understanding how a particular researcher’s values and expectations may have influenced the conduct and conclusions of the study (which may be either positive or negative) and avoiding the negative consequences of these” (165). As such, my own subjectivities and lenses were acknowledged, and steps were taken throughout the analysis of the results to ensure that these subjectivities did not over-influence the data collection methods or any conclusions drawn from the data itself.

Summary

The goal of this chapter was to outline the research method used to answer the research questions and address the afore-stated hypotheses. A discussion of the procedure, study participants, data collection, and survey questions outlined the specifics of how the study was conducted and who participated in the study. A constructivist grounded theory methodology was used to develop theory on the labor concerns of graduate student teaching assistants working in writing programs. All study participants
contributed to this theory by sharing their experiences through the distributed survey. The goal of Chapter IV is to provide the study results and demonstrate that the methodology described in Chapter III was followed.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the survey conducted in this research project. As outline in Chapter III, this study sought to build a theory in answer to the following research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: What are the labor concerns of graduate student teaching assistants working in writing programs?

RQ2: How are these connected to the material and financial resources offered by the institution?

As an overview, the results indicate an overall level of dissatisfaction with both the financial and material support that graduate student assistants receive as part of their assistantships. The results also show a discrepancy between the number of hours that graduate teaching assistants are contracted for, and the number of hours that they actually work to fulfill the duties of their role. The gathered data supports both stated hypotheses and provide answers to the research questions. This chapter provides tabulated and graphic representations of the data gathered from the research survey.
4.1 Determining Eligibility Criteria

Q1: Do you live and work in the United States?

From 129 responses, in answer to the question of whether participants live and work in the United States, 127 answered ‘yes’ and 2 answered ‘no’. The 2 responses that answered ‘no’ were removed from the data pool.

Q2: Are you a graduate student?

From 127 eligible responses, in answer to the question of whether participants are a graduate student, all 127 responses answered ‘yes’.

Q3: Do you currently work in a writing program? This writing program does not need to be housed in the Department of English.

From 122 eligible responses, in answer to the question of whether participants currently work in a writing program, 109 answered ‘yes’ and 13 answered ‘no’. The 13 responses that answered ‘no’ were removed from the data pool.

Q4: Do you currently hold at least one graduate assistantship (teaching or research)? If you currently hold more than one graduate assistantship position, please answer Yes.

From 108 eligible responses, in answer to the question of whether participants currently work in a writing program, 107 answered ‘yes’ and 1 answered ‘no’. The single response that answered ‘no’ was removed from the data pool. In total, from 129 initial responses, these questions determined that 107 responses met the full set of eligibility criteria and
could be used for this research analysis. 22 responses were removed from the data pool.

For the purposes of this research and to respect the labor of all survey participants, incomplete responses were included in the data analysis. This accounts for discrepancies in response counts to individual questions.

4.2 General Assistantship Questions

Q5: Which of the following best describes the institution you currently attend?

- Four-year public university
- Liberal arts college
- Four-year private university
- Historically Black College or University (HBCU)
- Community college

From 101 responses, 95.05% (n=96) responded that they currently attend a four-year public university. 4.95% (n=5) responded that they currently attend a four-year private
university, with no participants currently attending a liberal arts college. Zero respondents identified as attending a Historically Black College or University, with no responses indicating that participants are currently employed at a community college.

Q6: What kind(s) of graduate assistantship do you have? Please select all that apply.

From 144 responses, 63.19% (n=91) responded that they currently hold a teaching assistantship. 11.81% (n=17) responded that they currently hold a research assistantship, with 19.44% (n=28) currently identified as having an assistantship that places them in a writing center or associated unit. A total of 8 respondents (5.56%) indicated that they
have some other kind of assistantship. Participants may hold more than one type of assistantship, hence the increased number of responses.

Q7: How many contracted hours per week is your assistantship? If you hold more than one assistantship position, please indicate the total number of hours you are contracted to work per week.

From 101 responses, 0.99% (n=1) responded that their current assistantship(s) is contracted for less than 5 hours per week. 11.88% (n=12) responded that they are currently contracted for 5-10 hours per week, with 16.83% (n=17) currently holding an
assistantship contract that asks them to work 10-15 hours per week on assigned duties. 70.30% (n=71) respondents identified that their current assistantship contract is for more than 15 hours per week.

Q8: Do you teach a course that is part of a required sequence? E.g. first year writing, first year English, first year composition, etc.

From 101 responses, in answer to the question of whether participants currently teach a course that is part of a required sequence, 76 answered ‘yes’ and 25 answered ‘no’. This question did not ask participants to differentiate or be more specific about what required sequence their course was part of.

Q9: Are there any labor unions that represent graduate assistants at your institution?

From 101 responses, 35.64% (n=36) answered ‘yes’ and 45.54% (n=46) answered ‘no’. 18.81% (n=19) answered that they were unsure.

Q10: If you answered ‘yes’ to the previous question, are you a member of such a labor union?

From 59 responses, 59.32% (n=35) answered ‘yes’ and 40.68% (n=24) answered ‘no’. The researcher cannot account for the discrepancy in the total count of responses to this question, which does not align with the number of people who answered ‘yes’ to the previous question.
4.3 Institution Financial and Material Support

Q12: Do you receive financial benefits as part of your assistantship?

From 86 responses, 96.51% (n=83) of participants answered that they did receive financial benefits as part of their assistantship. Only 3 participants (3.49%) responded that they did not receive financial benefits. This question did not ask participants to differentiate or be more specific about what financial benefits they received. There was no investigation into the three responses that indicated they did not receive financial benefits; one potential explanation for these outlying results is that the understanding of ‘financial benefits’ was not made clear.

Q13: If yes, what form do these benefits take? Please select all that apply.

FIGURE 4.4: FINANCIAL BENEFITS BY CATEGORY

104
The majority (36.48% (n=85)) receive a salary or stipend as part of their assistantship. 24.03% (n=56) responded that they currently receive insurance benefits, with 35.19% (n=82) receiving reduced tuition or tuition abatements. 2.15% (n=5) respondents identified that they receive reduced cost or complementary parking passes as a financial benefit of their assistantship. A total of 5 respondents indicated that they receive some other kind of financial benefits. On the survey, these participants were able to enter a description of these benefits in their own words. Table 4.1 below shows these descriptions for the five ‘Other’ responses.

**TABLE 4.1: FINANCIAL BENEFITS - ‘OTHER’ CATEGORY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>professional development funding</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wellness fund</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>childcare benefits</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>legal benefits</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transit benefits</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q14: Do you receive material benefits as part of your assistantship?

From 86 responses, 93.02% (n=80) participants answered that they did receive material benefits as part of their assistantship. 6.98% (n=6) participants responded that they did not receive material benefits. This question did not ask participants to differentiate or be more specific about what material benefits they received.

Q15: If yes, what form do these benefits take? Please select all that apply.
From a total of 126 responses, the majority (54.76% (n=69)) were entitled to shared office space as part of their assistantship. 3.17% (n=4) responded that they currently had access to an office space that is not shared, with 11.90% (n=15) receiving textbooks as a material benefit. 15.07% (n=19) respondents identified that they have access to reduced cost or complementary printing services as a material benefit of their assistantship. 19 (15.07%) responses had access to teaching supplies provided by the institution. Only one respondent indicated that they receive some other kind of material benefits. On the
survey, this participants was able to enter a description of these benefits in their own words. Table 4.2 below shows these descriptions.

**TABLE 4.2: MATERIAL BENEFITS - ‘OTHER’ CATEGORY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>laptop</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q16: On a scale of one to ten, with one being ‘Not At All Accessible’ and ten being 'Very Accessible', how accessible do you feel these material benefits are?

![Figure 4.6: Accessibility of Material Benefits](image)

**FIGURE 4.6: ACCESSIBILITY OF MATERIAL BENEFITS**

2.32% (n=2) of participants indicated that they felt that the material benefits available to them were ‘Not At All Accessible’. With the numeric values 5 and 6 indicating a neutral response (30.23%, n=26), neither inaccessible or accessible, 20.93% (n=18) of
participants indicated that overall, they felt that the material benefits were inaccessible. In contrast, 48.83% (n=42) of participants indicated that overall, they felt that the material benefits were accessible, with 8.13% (n=7) responding that the material benefits available to them were ‘Very Accessible’.

Q17: Why do you feel your assistantship’s material benefits warrant the rating you provided?

The full set of raw data from this question is provided in Appendix C. To analyze this question, the researcher created codes based on frequently used words in the participants’ responses. In total, twelve codes were used. Then, the responses were read and assigned to one or more of the code categories based on the predominant thoughts expressed in each response.

**TABLE 4.3: RESPONSES - MATERIAL BENEFIT SATISFACTION REASONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Based on Keyword Use</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>office space</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>insurance</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poor/no access</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parking</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>printing</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uninformed/lack of information</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>office supplies/materials</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sharing</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>easy access</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minimal resources</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disability access</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>productivity</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q18: What other financial or material benefits would you like to see included as part of your graduate assistantship benefit package?

The full set of raw data from this question is provided in Appendix D. To analyze this question, the researcher created codes based on frequently used words in the participants’ responses. In total, nine codes were used. Then, the responses were read and assigned to one or more of the code categories based on the predominant thoughts expressed in each response.

**TABLE 4.4: PREFERRED FINANCIAL AND MATERIAL BENEFITS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Based on Keyword Use</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>insurance/healthcare</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parking permits/reduced cost parking</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no or reduced student fees</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>increased stipend/living wage</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaching supplies</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>single office space</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>retirement plan</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unions/unionization</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**4.4 Graduate Student Labor**

Q19: If you have a teaching assistantship, how many courses are you expected to teach per academic year?
From 83 responses from participants with teaching assistantships, 16.87% (n=14) responded that in their current assistantship, they are expected to teach one course per academic year. 40.96% (n=34) responded that they are currently expected to teach two courses per academic year, with 21.69% (n=18) expected to teach three courses per academic year. 19.28% (n=16) respondents identified that they currently expected to teach four courses per year, with 1.2% (n=1) indicating that they teach five or more courses a year.

Q20: How many total hours per week does your graduate assistantship cover? This information may have been included on your acceptance or offer letter at the beginning of your degree.
From 83 responses, no participants responded that their graduate assistantship covers less than 5 hours per week. 8.43% (n=7) responded that their assistantship covers between 5 and 10 hours per week, with 20.48% (n=17) contracted to work between 10 and 15 hours per week. 71.08% (n=59) respondents identified that their currently graduate assistantship covers more than 15 hours of labor.

FIGURE 4.8: CONTRACTED HOURS PER WEEK

and 10 hours per week, with 20.48% (n=17) contracted to work between 10 and 15 hours per week. 71.08% (n=59) respondents identified that their currently graduate assistantship covers more than 15 hours of labor.
Q21: How many hours per week, on average, do you actually spend as part of your assistantship, including unpaid time spent preparing for the work you have to do? This includes time spent planning lessons, grading papers, and responding to student emails, as well as time spent delivering lessons.

![Bar chart showing total hours worked per week]

**FIGURE 4.9: TOTAL HOURS WORKED PER WEEK**

From 83 responses, one participant (1.2%) responded that they actually spend less than five hours per week on their graduate assistantship responsibilities. 7.23% (n=6) responded that they actually work for between 5 and 10 hours per week, with 20.48% (n=17) actually conducting between 10 and 15 hours of labor per week. 71.08% (n=59) respondents identified that to cover their graduate assistantship responsibilities, they
work more than 15 hours. These results indicate that overall, graduate student assistants put more labor into their role than they are paid and contracted for.

Q22: Sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) defines ‘emotional labor’ as managing, suppressing, or containing one’s emotions within the workplace to better suit or match the needs, demands, and expectations of the employer. In your opinion, is emotional labor part of the work you do as a graduate assistant?
From 83 responses, 98.80% (n=82) participants answered that using the above definition, they did consider emotional labor to be part of the work they do as a graduate assistant. One participant (1.20%) responded that they did not consider emotional labor to be part of the work they do as a graduate assistant.

Q23: Does your department or institution offer any resources for managing emotional labor?
From 83 responses, 21.69% (n=18) of participants answered that their department or institution did offer resources for managing emotional labor. 44.58% (n=37) of participants responded that their department or institution did not offer resources for managing emotional labor, with 33.73% (n=28) of participants indicating that they did not know or were not sure.
Q24: If you answered ‘yes’ to the previous question, what sorts of resources does your department or institution offer?

The full set of raw data from this question is provided in Appendix E. To analyze this question, the researcher created codes based on frequently used words in the participants’ responses. In total, five codes were used. Then, the responses were read and assigned to one or more of the code categories based on the predominant thoughts expressed in each response.
4.5 Determining Overall Graduate Student Satisfaction

These questions were answered on a 5-point Likert scale from Very Dissatisfied to Very Satisfied.

Q25: How satisfied are you with the financial benefits you receive as a graduate assistant?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Based on Keyword Use</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>counseling services</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>therapy (individual or group)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mentorship</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lifestyle workshops</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>departmental support</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 4.11: SATISFACTION WITH FINANCIAL BENEFITS

TABLE 4.5: PROVIDED RESOURCES FOR MANAGING EMOTIONAL LABOR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Based on Keyword Use</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>counseling services</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>therapy (individual or group)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mentorship</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lifestyle workshops</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>departmental support</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
22.22% (n=18) of participants indicated that they felt ‘Very Dissatisfied’ with the financial benefits they receive as a graduate student. 39.51% (n=32) of participants indicated that they felt ‘Dissatisfied’ with the financial benefits available to them, with 8.64% (n=7) of participants indicating that they were ‘Neither Satisfied or Dissatisfied’.

In contrast, 25.93% (n=21) of participants indicated that overall, they felt that they were ‘Satisfied’ with the financial benefits they receive as a graduate student, with 3.70% (n=3) responding that they were ‘Very Satisfied’. Overall, 61.73% (n=50) of the responses indicated an overall level of dissatisfaction, 29.63% (n=24) indicated an overall level of satisfaction, and 8.64% (n=7) said they felt neutral about the financial benefits available to them as graduate student assistants.

Q26: How satisfied are you with the material benefits you receive as a graduate assistant?

![Figure 4.12: Satisfaction with Material Benefits](image)
18.52% (n=15) of participants indicated that they felt ‘Very Dissatisfied’ with the total monetary compensation they receive as a graduate student. 14.81% (n=12) of participants indicated that they felt ‘Dissatisfied’ with the total monetary compensation available to them, with 29.63% (n=24) of participants indicating that they were ‘Neither Satisfied or Dissatisfied’. In contrast, 30.86% (n=25) of participants indicated that overall, they felt that they were ‘Satisfied’ with the total monetary compensation available to them as a graduate student, with 6.17% (n=5) responding that they were ‘Very Satisfied’. Overall, 33.33% (n=17) of the responses indicated an overall level of dissatisfaction, 37.03% (n=30) indicated an overall level of satisfaction, and 29.63% (n=24) said they felt neutral about the material benefits available to them as graduate student assistants.

Q27: How satisfied are you with the number of hours for which you are paid?

![Bar chart showing satisfaction with paid hours]

**FIGURE 4.13: SATISFACTION WITH PAID HOURS**
17.28% (n=14) of participants indicated that they felt ‘Very Dissatisfied’ with the number of hours for which they are paid. 19.75% (n=16) of participants indicated that they felt ‘Dissatisfied’ with the number of hours for which they are paid, with 24.69% (n=20) of participants indicating that they were ‘Neither Satisfied or Dissatisfied’. In contrast, 34.57% (n=28) of participants indicated that overall, they felt that they were ‘Satisfied’ with the number of hours for which they are paid as a graduate student, with 3.70% (n=3) responding that they were ‘Very Satisfied’. Overall, 37.03% (n=30) of the responses indicated an overall level of dissatisfaction, 38.27% (n=31) indicated an overall level of satisfaction, and 24.69% (n=20) said they felt neutral about the number of hours for which they were paid.

Q28: How satisfied are you with the number of hours you work in comparison to the number of hours for which you are paid?

FIGURE 4.14: COMPARING HOURS PAID TO HOURS WORKED
25.93% (n=21) of participants indicated that they felt ‘Very Dissatisfied’ with the number of hours for which they are paid when compared to the number of hours they actually work. 32.10% (n=26) of participants indicated that they felt ‘Dissatisfied’ when comparing the two, with 17.28% (n=14) of participants indicating that they were ‘Neither Satisfied or Dissatisfied’. In contrast, 14.81% (n=12) of participants indicated that overall, they felt that they were ‘Satisfied’ with the number of hours for which they are paid as a graduate student when compared to the number of hours they actually work, with 9.88% (n=8) responding that they were ‘Very Satisfied’. Overall, 58.03% (n=47) of the responses indicated an overall level of dissatisfaction, 24.69% (n=20) indicated an overall level of satisfaction, and 17.28% (n=14) said they felt neutral about the number of hours for which they were paid when compared to the number of hours they actually work.

Q29: In your role as a graduate assistant, how satisfied are you with the benefits you receive and how you are treated by your employer at the unit or department level?

FIGURE 4.15: SATISFACTION WITH BENEFITS (DEPARTMENT/UNIT LEVEL)
9.88% (n=8) of participants indicated that they felt ‘Very Dissatisfied’ with the overall benefits offered by their employer at the department level. 24.69% (n=20) of participants indicated that they felt ‘Dissatisfied’, with 14.81% (n=12) of participants indicating that they were ‘Neither Satisfied or Dissatisfied’. In contrast, 35.80% (n=29) of participants indicated that overall, they felt that they were ‘Satisfied’ with the overall benefits offered by their employer at the department level, with 14.81% (n=12) responding that they were ‘Very Satisfied’. Overall, 34.57% (n=28) of the responses indicated an overall level of dissatisfaction, 50.61% (n=41) indicated an overall level of satisfaction, and 14.81% (n=12) said they felt neutral about the benefits offered by their employer at the department level.

Q30: In your role as a graduate assistant, how satisfied are you with the benefits you receive and how you are treated by your employer at the institutional level?

FIGURE 4.16: SATISFACTION WITH BENEFITS (INSTITUTION LEVEL)
43.21% (n=35) of participants indicated that they felt ‘Very Dissatisfied’ with the overall benefits offered by their employer at the institutional level. 32.10% (n=26) of participants indicated that they felt ‘Dissatisfied’, with 12.35% (n=10) of participants indicating that they were ‘Neither Satisfied or Dissatisfied’. In contrast, 12.35% (n=10) of participants indicated that overall, they felt that they were ‘Satisfied’ with the overall benefits offered by their employer at the institutional level, with no participants responding that they were ‘Very Satisfied’. Overall, 75.31% (n=61) of the responses indicated an overall level of dissatisfaction, 12.35% (n=10) indicated an overall level of satisfaction, and 12.35% (n=10) said they felt neutral about the benefits offered by their employer at the institutional level. This directly supports an answer to the second research question by emphasizing that the dissatisfaction comes from policies implemented at the institutional level, not the department or unit level, as shown in Q29.

Q31: What is your overall level of satisfaction with the collective benefits you may receive in your role as a graduate student?

FIGURE 4.17: OVERALL LEVEL OF SATISFACTION WITH BENEFITS
When asked to think holistically about their overall experience with the collective benefits they receive as graduate student assistants, 20.99% (n=17) of participants indicated that they felt ‘Very Dissatisfied’. 35.80% (n=29) of participants indicated that they felt ‘Dissatisfied’, with 18.52% (n=15) of participants indicating that they were ‘Neither Satisfied or Dissatisfied’. In contrast, 22.22% (n=18) of participants indicated that overall, they felt that they were ‘Satisfied’ with the collective benefits they receive in their role as graduate students, with only 2.47% (n=2) responding that they were ‘Very Satisfied’. Overall, 56.79% (n=46) of the responses indicated an overall level of dissatisfaction, 24.69% (n=20) indicated an overall level of satisfaction, and 18.52% (n=15) said they felt neutral about the collective benefits available to them.

### 4.6 Participant Demographic Data Collection

Responses to the following questions were not required.

Q32: What is your age?

On the survey, participants were able to enter a description of their age in their own words. Table 4.6 below shows these descriptions.

These descriptions were then plotted on to a line graph, shown below in Figure 4.18. The age range of the participants who responded to this question started at 20 and ended at 50. Due to the target demographic, all participants were aged 18 or above. The majority of participants were between the ages of 26-30. The mean age is 28.90, with the median age being 28.
Q33: What is your gender identity?

On the survey, participants were able to enter a description of their gender identity in their own words. Table 4.7 below shows these descriptions after coding. Responses were
coded by grouping together individual responses based on common phrases used by the participants themselves.

**Q34: Please specify your ethnicity.**

On the survey, participants were able to enter a description of their ethnicity in their own words. Table 4.8 below shows these descriptions after coding. Responses were coded by grouping together individual responses based on common phrases used by the participants themselves.

These descriptions were then displayed as a pie graph, shown below. 75 participants responded to this question.

**TABLE 4.7: PARTICIPANT GENDER IDENTITY BY SELF-EXPRESSION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>male/cisgender male/man</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female/cisgender female/woman</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transgender/trans</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nonbinary/nb</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>genderqueer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 4.8: PARTICIPANT ETHNICITY BY FREQUENCY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black African/African-American</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white/white international/white non-Hispanic/Caucasian</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mixed/biracial</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other ethnic heritage (Ashkenazi, Sephardic)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q35: Are you a person with a disability?

From 76 responses, 43.42% (n=33) of participants answered that they did identify as a person with a disability. 56.58% (n=43) participants responded that they did not identify as a person with a disability. This question did not ask participants to differentiate or be more specific about what disability they have.

Q36: If yes, how would you describe your disability? (E.g., visual impairment; limited mobility; neurodivergence; learning disability)
On the survey, participants were able to enter a description of their disability in their own words. Responses were coded by grouping together individual responses based on common phrases used by the participants themselves. Table 4.9 below shows these descriptions after coding.

TABLE 4.9: FREQUENCIES OF DISABILITY AS IDENTIFIED BY PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mental health concern</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neurodivergence</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anxiety/depression</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chronic illness</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mobility</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>visual impairment</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hearing impairment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These descriptions were then displayed as a pie graph, shown below in Figure 4.20. 43 participants responded to this question. From these responses, 4.65% (n=2) stated that they had a mental health concern that was not classed as anxiety or depression. 34.88% (n=15) of participants identified their disability as neurodivergence, with 9.30% (n=4) identifying anxiety and depression as a disability. 20.93% (n=9) suffer from a chronic illness, and 6.97% (n=3) identify as having mobility issues. 9.34% (n=4) have a visual impairment, and one participant (2.32%) has a hearing impairment. In addition, 11.62% (n=5) of respondents stated they had a disability that could not be coded into one of the above categories. These included CPTSD, fatigue, Type 1 diabetes, and “Disability
caused by United States’ cultural xenophobia and anti immigrant violence [sic]” (see Appendix H).

Q38: Which part of the United States do you currently work/study in? (E.g., Southeastern, Midwest)

On the survey, participants were able to enter a description of their geographical base in their own words. Responses were coded by grouping together individual responses based
on common phrases used by the participants themselves. Table 4.10 below shows these descriptions after coding.

TABLE 4.10: PARTICIPANT LOCATION WITHIN THE UNITED STATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Southeast/Southeastern</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South/Deep South</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Coast</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest/West</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These descriptions were then displayed as a pie graph, shown below in Figure 4.21. 78 participants responded to this question. From these responses, 35.89% (n=28) are currently living and working in the Southeastern United States, with 38.46% (n=30) living and working in the Midwest. 12 respondents (15.38%) live and work in the South or Deep South, and 6.41% (n=5) residing in the Northeastern United States. The two smallest regions were the Southwest/West, where 2.56% (n=2) of participants currently live and work, and one participant who responded that they live and work on the East Coast. Due the breadth of the East Coast and the lack of additional information, this result was not integrated into other regional zones.
Q39: How long have you held a graduate assistantship?

From 79 responses, 12.66% (n=10) of participants responded that they have held a graduate assistantship for less than one year. 41.77% (n=33) responded that they have held a graduate assistantship for between 1-3 years, with 36.71% (n=29) having held a graduate assistantship for between 3-6 years. 8.86% (n=7) respondents identified that they have held a graduate assistantship for more than six years.
Q40: How many graduate programs have you been enrolled in?

From 79 responses, 41.77% \((n=33)\) of participants responded that they have been enrolled in one graduate program. 55.70\% \((n=44)\) responded that they have been enrolled in two graduate programs, with 2.53\% \((n=2)\) having been enrolled in three or more graduate programs.
Q41: How many institutions have you attended as a graduate student?

From 79 responses, 48.10% (n=38) of participants responded that they have attended one institution for graduate study. 48.10% (n=38) responded that they have been enrolled in two institutions for graduate study, with 3.80% (n=3) having been enrolled in graduate study at three or more institutions.
FIGURE 4.24: NUMBER OF GRADUATE INSTITUTIONS ATTENDED
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this quantitative grounded theory study was to identify the most pressing labor concerns of graduate student assistants working in writing programs. This chapter includes a discussion of the major findings, particularly as they relate to the existing literature on graduate student labor. This chapter also discusses the implications of the data, and how these may be valuable for use by future graduate students, educators, administrators, field-specific organizations, and legislators. Also included in this chapter is a discussion on how this study connects to other projects. It concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and areas for future research.

This chapter contains discussion and future research possibilities to help answer the research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: What are the labor concerns of graduate student assistants working in writing programs?

RQ2: How are these connected to the material and financial resources offered by the institution

The results indicate that the labor concerns of graduate student assistants currently working in writing programs are multi-dimensional and predominantly comprised of three major themes: (a) financial compensation for the responsibilities of the assistantship
does not equate to the self-assigned value of the conducted labor, (b) participants identify material benefits as one area that could lead to greater levels of satisfaction, thereby suggesting that it is not solely financial concerns that should be considered as the primary area for improvement, and (c) graduate student assistants do consider emotional labor to be part of their work but receive little to no support in handling it. Some factors relate primarily to individual experience, but some speak to concerns about graduate student assistantships on a broader level. All of these identified themes contribute to a problematic working environment for graduate students within writing programs.

From the methods and methodology outlined in Chapter 3, I have extracted two types of data: quantitative data that offers a detailed picture of how participants feel about their academic labor and qualitative data that offers a broad look at the more specific concerns not covered by the initial survey questions. This chapter presents a discussion of the broad themes in the quantitative results, as outlined above, and discusses the implications of this quantitative data using the qualitative results as reinforcement of the core issues. The combination of these two types of data provide a solid picture of the current concerns of graduate student assistants working in writing programs.

While their overall experiences may include variation for each individual, each of the three major themes were prominent factors in participants’ feelings about graduate student assistant labor conditions. These themes have a dynamic dimension to them, as what is important to the individual changes over time, and often relates to socio-political dynamics at play in the participant’s location. Each theme is described in detail in the follow sections.
5.1 Financial Compensation Does Not Equal Value of Conducted Labor

This study’s conclusion that there is a discrepancy in the average amount of weekly hours graduate student assistants work when compared to the number of hours for which they are paid agrees with the historical literature that indicates graduate student assistants are viewed as cheap and disposable labor (Birdsell Bauer, 2017; Ginsberg, 2011; Slaughter et al, 2002). The gathered data suggests that there is an overall level of dissatisfaction with the compensation offered to graduate student teaching assistants. Specifically, the majority of this dissatisfaction stems from the financial benefits received from their programs. These results indicate that overall, graduate students that hold an assistantship feel that their work and labor is undervalued by both the institution and their department. This is overwhelmingly supported by the fact that a number of respondents feel that they need to work more than the number of hours for which they are paid. Now, this is not to say that the amount of work graduate student assistants are asked to do in itself necessitates an excess number of hours. While I am certain this is the case for some, I would hesitate to state it definitively. Instead, it suggests that a combination of internal and external pressures exist that create an environment in which graduate student assistants feel that they need to work more hours to cover even the bare minimum of their duties, leading to what Welch and Scott see as “wealth inequality” directly linked to labor inequity (37).

Some of this may be attributed to a lack of experience in managing the duties of assistantships in writing programs — a graduate student assistant with minimal teaching experience teaching a course for the first time, for example, might need to spend longer
on lesson planning and preparation, in comparison to a more experienced graduate student assistant who taught that same course in previous semesters. What this particular set of results further implies is that in terms of how graduate student assistants feel about the labor they actually do, when compared to the number of hours they are paid for, the graduate student assistant experience is predominantly negative. 58.03% (n=47) of respondents state that they are dissatisfied with the discrepancy between their salary and the number of hours they work, with an additional 17.28% (n=14) feeling neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. This implies the presence of external factors that create an environment that necessarily expects, if not demands, this additional labor. This discrepancy also often leads to an internal conflict the graduate student assistant has to navigate. If a graduate student employment contract — often named a “Letter of GA Offer” or “Graduate Assistantship Agreement” — states that the student can expect to be paid for, for example, fifteen hours of associated labor per week, then the student is torn. Do they limit themselves to only working fifteen hours, regardless of whether they complete everything they need to do that week? Or do they accept that planning lessons, grading, classroom time, and communicating with students might take more than fifteen hours, and take the loss of income?

The results from the survey indicate some conflict here. 8.43% of participants are paid for between 5-10 hours per week, 20.48% are paid for between 5-10 hours, and 71.08% answered that they were contracted, and therefore paid, for more than 15 hours per week. The next question, which asked how many hours they actually worked when compared to the number for which they were contacted, offered similar results. 7.23% of
respondents actually work between 5-10 hours, 20.48% answered that they actually work between 5-10 hours per week, and 71.08% answered that they actually work more than 15 hours per week to cover the responsibilities of their assistantship. One participant works less than five hours per week, an anomaly in the results as no response indicated their graduate student assistantship was only contracted for five hours or less. What these results indicate is that, with the exception of the anomalous response, the majority of participants actually work the same number of hours for which they are paid. This could be explained by a few different scenarios: a) the participants themselves are aware of the value of their labor and make a conscious choice to only work when they are paid to do so, self-managed through things such as labor logs, journals, time management logs, etc.; b) the departments that the majority of respondents belong to do a better job at ensuring their graduate student assistants don’t overwork, perhaps through professional development specifically focusing on academic labor, or time management; or c) the workload for these participants is designed precisely to reduce the burden of labor on the graduate student assistant workforce. Given that 42.17% (n=35) of survey participants are contracted to teach a minimum of three courses per year, I suspect the answer is likely a combination of graduate student assistant self-discipline and labor-focused professional development.

When asked to explain why they gave their graduate student assistantship benefits the rating they did, participants made justifications such as, “I would like for the graduate assistantship to pay closer to a living wage; rent in the town my university is located in has gone up 100 dollars every year, and wages have not matched that increase, meaning
that I have had to take out exorbitant student loans” and “A stipend that reflects the cost of living. Currently monthly CoL is >80% of stipend, and additional employment isn't permitted” (see Appendices C and D). But, as the survey suggests, it’s not just the stipend or salary that leads to an overall level of dissatisfaction. When thinking about what other financial benefits graduate student assistants receive as part of their assistantship packages, 36.48% of survey participants receive a salary or stipend, 24.03% have insurance benefits included in their contract, and 35.19% also receive a tuition abatement or reduced tuition waiver. Increased provision of health insurance has recently been one of the key action items for graduate student labor unions.

Graduate student assistants have a keen awareness of the areas of their lives that are negatively affected by low stipend values and high living costs. Not only this, but the participants in this survey were also able to clearly state definitive policies that would rectify, or at the very least mitigate, some of these financial concerns. The question that asked respondents to state in their own words what other financial or material benefits they would like to see as part of their graduate student assistant benefits package supports the claim that the lack of provision of comprehensive health insurance negatively affects the overall experience of graduate students. More specifically, respondents indicated that in addition to a general improvement in coverage, better dental and vision provision would be beneficial. Of the 29 responses that explicitly mention “health insurance”, “insurance”, or “coverage”, twelve of them specifically state that dental and vision

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1 See the United Campus Workers Local 3765 recent victory at the University of South Carolina. See also: ongoing efforts by United Graduate Workers at the University of New Mexico; the unionization efforts at Boston College; and the efforts to gain health insurance coverage for graduate students at MIT.
coverage would be a welcomed improvement (see Appendix D). Further, health insurance coverage during the summer months is mentioned multiple times; frequently, any coverage offered by the institution is only active during the months were a graduate student is enrolled in credit hours. Over the long summer break, health insurance lapses and graduate students are often left paying for health care expenses out of their own pocket. Given that stipend payments also cease at the end of the academic calendar year, as discussed later, for graduate student assistants with ongoing health concerns, or even in the event of emergent situations, this can frequently be an added burden that could be addressed by extending the period of health insurance coverage for a full year in places where this isn’t already the case.

This leads to something that is demonstrated in the analysis of the survey results: something that would go a long way to increasing the satisfaction of graduate student assistants, in addition to overall stipend increases, is creating a system where those stipends are distributed over a full year, not just for eight or nine months. Respondents indicated that this would be an improvement they would like to see, with statements ranging from, “I would like to see a pay schedule the covered the entire year, rather than 10 months” to “guaranteed summer pay (sic)” (see Appendix D). The effects of this would be mixed. On one hand, it would logically mean that stipend payments, paid at regular intervals over a full year, would be smaller amounts. This, in turn, would not necessarily negate the need for graduate student assistants to seek additional employment. On the other hand, however, it does mean that with some income across the extended breaks, such as winter and summer, graduate student assistants may have more time to
focus on the demands of their own academic interests. If any labor done over these stretches of time is supplementary income, not the sole income earning employment, it suggests that a graduate student assistant might feel less obligated to take on, for example, a 40-hour per week job. Reclaiming the time gained from needing to work less may allow graduate student assistants to engage in some of the professional development activities needed to ensure the best future opportunities. Publishing journal articles, for example, or building productive and meaningful collaborative relationships with other members of their departments.

Another tangible area where institutions could improve the financial benefits offered to graduate student assistants relates to parking. 27 survey participants indicated that free or discounted is a key factor in their levels of satisfaction. Responses included, “The fact graduate students only have access to the same parking as undergrads is wildly unfair and inappropriate”, “reduced rates on parking passes. We have an unreliable local bus system, and yearlong passes are $250”, and “Access to parking near our building” (see Appendix D). One respondent adds, “We are part of an urban campus, but not a lot of housing options nearby and very little public transportation. A parking pass is around $800 per academic year, and otherwise we rely on metered parking. It's a financial burden for many graduate students, so parking benefits would be exceptionally helpful” (see Appendix D). Another suggests that, “A complimentary parking pass would be practically life-changing. With my current GTA assignment, I am often working hours that exceed expectations [sic] while doing difficult labor. I would appreciate additional compensation for this work” (see Appendix D).
In *Nature’s* 2022 survey of nearly 3200 graduate students from around the world, their conclusion was that the economic turmoil and financial stress was a significant roadblock to career progression. Around 45% of respondents to the Nature survey agreed that the rising costs of living were a factor in their decisions to continue or quit their graduate program. As also seen in the data gathered here, North American respondents listed ‘overall cost of living’ as one of the most prevalent concerns around getting a graduate degree. In his report on the survey results, Chris Woolston writes that, “Respondents in North America are nearly unanimous in their worries: 95% agreed or strongly agreed that the rising cost of living is a concern”. The data gathered in the survey that forms that basis of this research also seems to support this conclusion.

According to Eric Weiskott’s 2021-2022 report on English doctoral stipends, published in MLA’s *Professions* journal, the annual stipend amount ranges from $14004 at the University of Oregon, to $41520 at Columbia University. The mean stipend was $25006 for the 2021-2022 academic year. This is further supported by Weiskott’s follow-up article from September 2022, when he writes that, “The median English Ph.D. stipend at 69 top-ranked departments is a mere $25,000 per year. That falls below minimum wage in some states, assuming that graduate study is a 9-to-5 job…Because this figure is the median, we must bear in mind that half of the top English Ph.D. programs in the country pay less than $25,000, a fact that should shame those with the power to raise stipends” (Weiskott, emphasis added). In 2008, the average graduate assistant salary was less than $14,000 per year, barely above the federal poverty line (Brown et al 337). At my own institution, in the eight years I have been a member of this department, the annual
graduate student stipend, which is the same for all doctoral students regardless of
discipline, has only increased by $2000 or 15.6%. Of course, some will say that a 15.6%
increase is better than nothing, but even when compared at a surface level to the change
in inflation, we will see that those extra $2000 may not close the gap.

With the cost of health insurance for a single person household averaging,
nationwide, $448 per month, that works out to approximately $5376 per year. Taken out
of the average $14,000 graduate assistant salary, that is around 40%. Evidence shows that
graduate students, both with and without assistantships, are more likely than other
populations of workers to experience symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other
common mental health issues (Evans et al., 2018; Correa et al., 2021). Correa et al’s
conclusion is that “the graduate education environment is more detrimental to mental
health than general working conditions and is also unfavorable to well-being” (6). Where
institutions are not providing adequate healthcare access, either in the form of insurance
subsidies or on-campus services, quite frequently these symptoms go untreated. In terms
of physical health, as with all labor-intensive jobs, graduate student assistants face
additional physical problems: repetitive strain injuries, back and mobility problems,
migraines. There is no workplace compensation available for graduate student assistants
—a job related injury or physical symptom is left to the student to cover, and in those
circumstances where the institution does not offer health insurance, or only offers
minimal coverage, a graduate student assistant may be looking at significant costs.

The lack of health insurance coverage at a number of institutions, both public and
private, is also frequently a burden on adjuncts and other contingent faculty groups. The
2014 death of Margaret Mary Vojtko, an 83-year old adjunct at Duquesne University, and
the 2019 death of Thea Hunter, an adjunct at Princeton University, have both been, in
part, attributed to the lack of health insurance offered by institutions to their contingent
workforce. For Margaret Vojtko, the administrative bodies at Duquesne had consistently
cut back the number of courses she taught per semester, reducing her income to the point
that she could not afford to keep the heating switched on in her home. While she did have
Medicare, the cumulative effects of her reduced income meant that she did not have
access to health services. Thea Hunter faced a similar situation — having earned her
doctoral degree from Columbia University, she initially took a tenure track job at Western
Connecticut State University, then a visiting professorship at Princeton. However,

By 2009, her contract at Princeton had run out. The recession had set in, and
faculty jobs in and around New York City were even harder to find than before.

Thea, who did not have time to adapt her dissertation into a book, had not
published in a while. On top of that, her résumé began to look scattershot,
depicting an odd trajectory that most academic hiring committees wouldn’t
recognize: a job on the tenure track to a visiting position to a glorified teaching
assistantship to a series of brief adjunct appointments (Harris, 2019).

While employed as an adjunct at City College of New York, Thea passed away due to
multi-organ failure that arose from complications due to asthma. Had she had health
insurance that allowed her to see a doctor for regular checkups, Thea Hunter’s death
could have been entirely preventable.
Another aspect to the disproportionate labor conducted by graduate student teaching assistants comes from the regulations installed by the graduate school at many institutions. It has become a standard of these bodies to state that graduate students may only be employed, in any sense, for a maximum of twenty hours per week during the semester, or at any other time when classes are in session. A handful of exceptions exist allowing graduate students to apply for additional leeway if their employment is deemed necessary to their graduate study. Generally, however, the twenty hour rule stands. The rationale, it seems, is that the focus of this population should be on their own study, not on an ‘extracurricular’ like employment. A graduate teaching assistantship would take up a number of the allocated hours — the gathered data indicates that most graduate student assistant contracts are for a minimum of five hours, with the majority being for 15 or more hours per week. This means that for the majority of participants, they would have a paltry five hours per week to seek additional employment if they needed to.

Being unable to pick up additional work outside of the university to supplement a low income means that graduate students will frequently, as Cary Nelson so aptly stated in the title of his 1997 collection, teach for food. The situation is of course much graver for graduate student assistants that raise families, support partners, spouses, and loved ones, or have other financial considerations (Anson 17). If the stipend amount itself will not change in a meaningful way, an alternative area for progress is to adjust, or ideally remove completely, the limits on how graduate students can support themselves without needing to rely on loans. The situation is frequently more dire for international students, who on top of facing the limited hours, are also confined to seeking on-campus
employment. This is all well and good when the campus is functioning as ‘normal’, but what happens when it isn’t functioning as normal? During the first phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Spring and Summer of 2020, a significant majority of campuses transitioned to virtual, distance, and online learning. Sites of on-campus employment were closed for regular business, meaning that a number of international students were left without any opportunity to support themselves; while domestic students without summer funding can work outside of the university, international students are legally prohibited from doing so with few exceptions and are often forced to survive the summer without income to avoid jeopardizing their visa.

Marc Bousquet (2008) writes that, “Overstressed student workers commonly approach their position from a consumer frame of analysis. They are socialized and even legally obliged to do so, while being disabled by various means, including employment law, from thinking otherwise. To a certain extent, the issue is that student workers are underpaid and ripped off as consumers” (153). Unlike other industries built around a capitalist ideology, for graduate student assistants in higher education there is no financial reward for being great at your job. Some — I’m thinking specifically of my own instructor who told us being miserable and stressed was a consequence of the choice to enter grad school — might argue that any such reward would come later. Having outstanding teaching evaluations might improve ones chances at a tenure review, for example, or perhaps the reward might take the form of something more sentimental like the knowledge that your students enjoyed your class. But, like so many other things, sentimentality doesn’t pay utility bills. One survey respondent stated that an additional
financial benefit they receive is, “‘experience’ for CVs that will help with ‘future’ financial benefits/career” indicating that the idea of longer-term benefits emerging from graduate study may be a popular ideology amongst institutions.

In terms of professional development, the intrinsic push amongst cohorts and departments to encourage ‘going above and beyond’ while simultaneously advocating for self-care and self-prioritization forces graduate students to choose. The results support the idea that this choice leads to a devaluation of the time spent balancing these dual responsibilities. But what of the pressure to perform? What intrinsic value is it in graduate students working in writing program that they do spend more time on their assistantship duties? Many in the position of educating others have been afflicted with the imposter syndrome at one point or another, commonly a form of competence and social shame where we are overcome with the sense that we don’t know enough, do enough, or have the requisite expertise we believe we “should” have; where we live in constant fear of being exposed for not being the expert our role suggests (Walker 363). The invisible labor amongst a cohort of graduate students presents itself as unspoken competition, an internal drive to do better, to do more than, in part because the unstated implication of enrolling in graduate study is that you will sacrifice all of your time to this undertaking, regardless of whether you are paid, because how else will you succeed? When graduate programs paint an overly positive picture – a false utopia of cohort cohesion – students can feel shamed for experiencing something that is a natural part of life. School breaks become opportunities for professional development. To the question, “What did you do over the summer?”, the answer, invariably, is “I worked.” Now admittedly, the form of
that work varies, but the fundamental fact remains that the (in)visibility of what had to be
done to get ahead manifests as this pervasive competition that nobody really talks about
(Paulson).

In conjunction with including topics on emotional labor in department practices
and graduate-level courses, I suggest developing a network of learning and professional
development opportunities which emphasize academic labor as a categorically important
part of graduate study. By increasing the number of professional development workshops
to include a focus on assisting graduate student instructors in balancing their dual roles as
teachers and learners, beyond just suggesting time management skills or other elements
that suggest the graduate student instructor is at fault, rather than a victim of a failing
system. If, in fact, a number of graduate student assistants will leave higher education to
take on roles as contingent lecturers, adjuncts, or temporary faculty, which seems an
increasing likelihood based on the trends towards a teaching force that is predominantly
contingent, then part of graduate education within English-based disciplines should be
engaging with the conversations around academic labor as career planning.

Since a conclusion drawn earlier was that the conclusions drawn from this set of
results are not necessarily specific to writing programs, but instead can be said to stem
from changes and directives at the institutional level as a result of capitalism, any
solutions are applicable to graduate student assistants in general. Overwhelmingly, the
implication of the gathered results that explore issues surrounding the financial benefits
attached to graduate student assistantships is that many of them can be rectified by
increasing the stipend value. As overwhelmingly indicated in the gathered survey data,
institutions must make moves to increase graduate student assistant stipends to match the
cost of living. It is a myth perpetuated by university managers that graduate students
training for MAs and PhDs exist somehow outside of the pyramid of academic labor and
therefore do not require appropriate compensation for their time and work. In terms of
both teaching and research assistance for senior faculty, graduate student assistants are
engaged in the collective project of sustaining institutions of higher education and
reproducing scholarly disciplines. They are the foundation of the pyramid. Reducing their
status to mere trainees, interns, or apprentices would ignore the reality of their labor
conditions. The full weight of the academic pyramid already falls upon them, and
denying their right to join unions and benefit from collective bargaining would intensify
the exploitation and arbitrary institutional power to which they are already subjected. As
documented by the results, in many places, graduate student assistant stipends do not
match the cost of living for the state, let alone provide sufficient income to support
graduate student assistants with dependents.

5.2 Material Benefits Lead to Levels of Dissatisfaction

When thinking about the relationship between the material benefits that graduate
student assistants receive and their levels of satisfaction, the results indicate a positive
correlation. For the respondents in this survey, the quality and access of the material
benefits negatively effects their overall levels of satisfaction. 93.02% (n=80) of responses
said that they did receive material benefits, while 6.98% (n=6) did not; office space was
one of the most common benefits included in the assistantship compensation. Overall,
these particular results indicated that there was a consistent trend in what material
benefits are offered to graduate student assistants, and that in this survey, with a single exception, the material benefits almost exclusively fit in to the options given in this question.

54.76% (n=69) of participants who agreed that they received material benefits answered that shared office space was available to them. Four respondents (3.17%) had access to an office space that was not shared; one person wrote that, “[They] have a single office space for [their] administrative/assistantship position and [they] also have shared space for/as grad students” (see Appendix C). 15.07% (n=19) of responses indicated that they had access to teaching supplies such as board markers, composition books, or other stationary needed to fulfill their responsibilities. One participant did not select the teaching supplies option in this question, but added a comment that states they have that option, “like asking nicely, and not too often, for some markers” (see Appendix C). One participant had access to an institution-provided laptop. 11.90% (n=15) of the survey participants receive textbooks, although the survey did not clarify whether these textbooks were used for teaching purposes — along the lines of instructor copies — or whether the textbooks included in the material benefits were for the graduate student assistant’s use in their own classes.

When asked to rate how accessible the material benefits are on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being ‘Not At All Accessible’ and 10 being ‘Very Accessible’, 35.80% (n=29) rated the accessibility of material benefits as a 5 or below, meaning they were generally considered inaccessible. Comparatively, 65.43% (n=53) indicated they overall, they felt that their material benefits were accessible, for a mean rating of 6.27. The justifications
for participants’ ratings provides more evidence that office space is a significant factor to graduate student assistants’ overall levels of satisfaction with their material benefits. One participant wrote that, “I share a small office with 3 other GTAs, which feels crowded, especially when there are in-person conferences (that is one reason that I have switched to Zoom conferences)” (see Appendix C). Others pointed out the effects of overcrowding on productivity, stating, “1/4th of a small office is not conducive to productivity” (see Appendix C) and “I work in an open ‘bull-pen’ type space with a bunch of open room and a ‘L’ shape row of desks for grad assistants. It can get loud which impacts my work” (see Appendix C).

Additionally, for some graduate student assistants, there is no guarantee of appropriate office space in the first place. One participant wrote that in their experience, “office space was weirdly and inconsistently allocated, so that the process of seniority allowing us say and placement into nicer spaces did not happen without…making requests and then finally volunteering to give up [my] office space all together” (see Appendix C). Other factors that were considered when justifying the rating given centered around the quality and condition of the buildings themselves. Responses indicated that many buildings that housed office space for graduate student assistants were often outdated, hazardous, or too far away from teaching locations to be of any real use. For one participant, their office space is “a dark cold dirty basement where everything is broken and smells bad. the [sic] wifi is spotty and there's no cell service” (see Appendix C). For others, the location of their graduate student workspace creates physical hazards: "Our department's building is pretty terrible--I've had two
friends file worker's comp claims because of mold issues and injuries from slipping on ice. This is more of a campus than departmental issue” and “Our offices are tiny shared cubicles with furniture from the 60s that are (literally! we hired safety inspectors to confirm this! and then nothing happened!!) [sic] fire hazards and health risks. The mold is so bad that at least one person actually had to file workers' comp” (see Appendix C). This is another example of how graduate students are often expected to put their health on the line; working in buildings that have problems such as the ones stated in the survey, in addition to other problems such as poor or non-functioning HVAC systems, a propensity for flooding, and poor lighting, may contribute to higher levels of health problems amongst graduate student assistants. Given the prior discussion around health insurance, or the lack thereof, mitigating the exposure of graduate students to detrimental physical working conditions would be a smart move.

15.07% (n=19) of the survey participants had access to reduced cost or complementary printing services, however in one case, the printer had been broken for months. Not all graduate student instructors feel comfortable relying solely on digital materials for teaching. By this I mean, there are some graduate student instructors who prefer having printed lesson plans, for example, or printed texts to highlight or annotated for class discussion. Where reduced cost or complementary printing services are inaccessible within a department, it means that those graduate student instructors need to pay out of their own pocket for something that might be necessary to conduct part of the graduate assistantship duties. Here’s a textbook-related example — a number of responses indicated that being provided with free or reduced cost textbooks would be an
impactful change that they would like to see. My own department transitioned from a traditional printed textbook to an online textbook with exercises. The printed textbook contained short stories, essays, texts used for the teaching of the first-year English sequence. Graduate students in the department had the opportunity to contribute to the textbook by writing introductions, discussion questions, and in-class activities, and were compensated for their time. The reason for this switch, as it was explained, was in part to reduce the departmental costs associated with paying for the licenses and permissions needed to reprint the textual content. The cost of this textbook for undergraduate students taking these first-year required courses was $67.89. The retail price of the access code required for the new digital text is $135.67, almost twice as much as the printed book. The stipend for the 2023-2024 academic year — a full year after the textbook change was instituted — is roughly the same amount that it has been for almost a decade, so where have the profits from the access code sales gone?

The debate over whether printed materials or digital materials are best for students became all the more relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the conversation is rooted in talks about the accessibility of higher education. Universities that extoll diversity and inclusion mandates, then allow their departments and professors to use textbooks that are grossly expensive, effectively leave their low-income students — very often including students of color — behind. Putting diversity and inclusion first means being accessible, and affording all of your students the basic human decency of being caring and compassionate. Expecting students to spend so much money, especially during
a pandemic, makes it hard to believe that universities prioritize their students’ well-being over their ability to make a profit.

Space for graduate students in various disciplines remains a focus, but has transitioned to flexible work environments with private spaces for a person to have a phone call, create video content, or accomplish focused work; a variety of conference and meeting rooms based on the activities and frequency of these activities for a particular group and informal areas for casual interactions and activities such as reading or email. Recent scholarship (Adikesavan and Ramasubramanian, 2021; Hirst, 2011) has examined the effects of ‘hotdesking’ as an alternative to having designated office space, suggesting that some institutions are turning towards this as a solution to one aspect of the labor concerns of graduate student assistants and contingent faculty. The problem with hotdesking, or any other form of very temporary workspace, is by its very nature, it reinforces the idea that these groups — graduate students and contingent faculty — do not warrant dedicated spaces of their own. In many hotdesking situations, spaces are first come first serve, or need to be booked in advance. This doesn’t address the core issues as identified by the survey data: that privacy, preferably in the form of single office space, is conducive both to teaching needs and graduate students’ scholarly identities.

Beyond the immediate concerns of the effects that poor building maintenance and unfavorable working conditions have on those that work in them, it raises a perhaps more delicate point about the position of humanities fields and subjects within the ‘bigger picture’ of the American university. Returning to the effects of the commodification of higher education, in recent discourse, the decline of the humanities has been attributed to
the corporatization of the American university (Goldstein, 2021). Even in past decades, scholars like Donoghue (2008) have argued that the infiltration of market forces into university administration forces the primary basis for decision making to turn from academic motivations to economic ones. Even before the economic collapse of 2008, in The University in Ruins (1997), Bill Readings makes a similar argument: the globalization of capital is undermining national culture, taught and disseminated in large part by humanities subjects, which has been the university's integrating principle since the Enlightenment. Newfield (2003) argues that the liberal-arts tradition and capitalist culture are contradictory forces that create conflicts for both the academy and students; university corporatization and a thriving humanities culture, he suggests, cannot coexist.

Regarding English subjects specifically, particularly when compared to STEM fields or business programs, this seems indicative of the lack of funding faced by humanities-based departments across the country. In the capitalist academy, there is evidence to show that department funds directly correlates to the amount of profit a department can bring in (Newfield, 2022). For example, departments that can bring the institution financial gains in the form of patents, contracts, and extended grants tend to be in science and technology fields — it would do the institution no good to reduce the earning potential of these programs by cutting their budgets or staff. The ongoing decline in the humanities, Chace (2009) writes, is because it, “bring[s] in almost no outside income. Economists, chemists, biologists, psychologists, computer scientists, and almost everyone in the medical sciences win sponsored research, grants, and federal dollars. By and large, humanists don’t, and so they find themselves as direct employees of the
institutions, consuming money in salaries, pensions, and operating needs — not external money but institutional money” (37).

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2021) recently discussed the effect of shrinking university budgets on graduate programs in disciplines such as archeology, language, and fine arts. The article cites a number of universities, including the University of Maryland, Harvard, and UCLA, that are cutting back on admissions to graduate programs in the humanities. Other schools are also cutting less popular specializations and subfields. Proponents of these actions recognize the financial necessity of cutting back on lower-yielding programs and the dangers of introducing more graduates into an already flooded market; however, others lament the loss of graduate students, perhaps because they realize that the loss of graduate students also means the loss of a significant portion of the instructional staff. Less cynically, professors may bemoan the changes in graduate school culture because for some, mentoring graduate students is one of the most valuable aspects of being a university professor.

While seemingly an innocuous concern at a surface level, what lack of printing access exemplifies is symptomatic of broader institutional changes due to the commodification of higher education. For many higher education institutions, a key focus is identifying where there are additional areas to increase profit. Charging for printing, even if the printed materials are necessary to the graduate student assistant’s teaching or research responsibilities, is often another source of profit. What both the provision of textbooks and access to printing services have in common is that in situations where they are not covered by the department or institution, they are additional expenses for the
students to bear. Divincenzo (2022) writes that “textbook prices have inflated more than 1000% since the 1970s, faster than any other cost of college”.

43.42% (n=33) of participants who chose to answer this question indicated that they identify as having some kind of disability. From these responses, 34.88% (n=15) identify as neurodivergent. The conversation surrounding the cost and availability of printed materials also has implications for the concerns of graduate students with disabilities. For students with visual impairments, for example, screen reading isn’t always a viable option. Likewise, it’s also not necessarily a better option for undergraduate students. Ackerman and Goldsmith (2011) observed that when students could choose how much time to spend on digital versus print reading, they devoted less to reading onscreen and had lower comprehension. Schugar and colleagues (2011) found that participants reported using fewer study strategies (such as highlighting, note-taking, or bookmarking) when reading digitally. Kaufman and Flanagan (2016) noted that when reading in print, study participants did better answering abstract questions that required inferential reasoning; by contrast, participants scored better reading digitally when answering concrete questions.

It seems indicative of the struggle faced by graduate students that there appeared to be a level of bland acceptance among the responses; the survey participants either accepted the state of affairs without further comment, or raised solid objections to the quality and accessibility of the material benefits offered by their departments. It is the responses that signified acceptance that should be of interest. This almost apathetic response could be explained in a number of ways: a) this is a further example of the
challenges graduate student assistants face in finding their own professional identities, the idea of what they should advocate for disconnected by the nebulous web of conversation around whether they are students or workers; b) the general attitude that anything is better than nothing — and I don’t mean to suggest that this is an invalid position to have, but it edges far too close to the problematic idea that because graduate study is a choice, we should just sit there and be grateful, or c) a lack of awareness of what better alternatives may exist.

5.3 Little to No Support for Emotional Labor

One other aspect to the argument about the value of a graduate student’s work seems to come from a debate over what is or is not included in the labor itself. While 98.80% (n=82) of respondents indicated that they did believe emotional labor to be a part of their responsibilities as a graduate student assistant working in a writing program, the survey did not ask whether there is an equal demand of emotional labor stemming from being a graduate student in the first place.

98.80% of survey participants answered that they considered emotional labor, using Arlie Hochschild’s established definition, to be a part of the labor they conduct as graduate student assistants. When asked whether their department or institution offered any resources for managing emotional labor, the results were mixed: 21.69% (n=18) responded yes, 44.58% (n=37) responded no, and 33.73% (n=28) were unsure. Out of the eighteen positive responses, survey participants were asked to indicate in their own words what kind of resources were available. Many of the participants said that there were various mental health programs established to equip graduate student assistants with the
tools needed to manage emotional labor. One response stated, “GTAs are required to take a class called "Teaching College Composition" in which we spend a lot of time talking about experiences as they're happening and troubleshooting problems. Our professor encourages us to talk about write about the emotional labor we're putting in. This is the closest thing we have to any departmental support” (see Appendix E), suggesting that at least at some institutions, administrators are aware of the problem enough to establish mitigating behaviors.

From the 25 own-word responses in the survey conducted as part of this project, 14 of them indicated that the extent of the support for managing emotional labor was institution-wide mental health provision offered to the entire student body, such as counseling services, individual and group therapy, or other campus mental health services. How graduate students feel about the availability of these services, however, indicates that there is room for improvement. Criticism offered by the survey participants includes, “[counseling services] are frequentley [sic] at capacity and there is a limit on individual sessions”, “individual therapy appointments are typically only available for once a month”, and “We technically have a mental health services center but it's very inaccessible” (see Appendix E). Another participant states that, “They expect us to sign up for counseling or therapy, which is critically understaffed at our university” (see Appendix E). The use of the word ‘they’ in this comment could either be the institution or the department; regardless, this comment implies that whichever unit holds the expectation believes that counseling or therapy should be enough to mitigate the effects of emotional labor on graduate students. Even without critiquing that belief itself, the fact
that this respondent highlights how “critically understaffed” the mental health provision is at their institution further suggests that those services are not deemed as a priority. At the department level, five responses indicated that their departments were aware of emotional labor and did have practices in place to equip graduate students with the ability to manage it. One participant says that, “We have access to some type of workshop on occasion [sic]”; another responded that their support comes from “1:1 mentorship with professors” (see Appendix E).

Interestingly, one response touches on the emotional labor implicit to graduate study and cohort relations. They say, “There are also mentoring programs, both within my First-Year English program and my English Department, although these ironically do place more emotional labor on the experienced grad students who mentor newer grad students” (see Appendix E). This person makes a great point — it often seems like the case that experienced graduate students in a department, with or without assistantships, are responsible for assisting, welcoming, or mentoring incoming or new graduate students. For those that have teaching assistantships, there may be the pressure to share teaching resources such as lesson plans, strategies, or classroom management techniques.

In this survey, 19.44% (n=28) of respondents are currently carrying out their graduate student assistant responsibilities in writing centers. This indicates a potential need to further explore the differences in how graduate student labor functions in writing centers compared to instructional writing programs such as first-year composition courses. Because of the more personal interactions that take place in writing centers, which also frequently have smaller numbers of workers, a self-contained space, and a
source of localized authority such as a director, there is also the potential for writing centers to be sites of emotional abuse. Given the tendency of writing tutoring to be more reliant on one-on-one interaction than classroom instruction might be, graduate student labor concerns as they apply solely to writing center work may focus on a different vector of the concerns indicated here.

The survey conducted for this research shows that 68.00% (n=51) of participants identified as female, compared to 21.33% (n=16) identifying as male, and 9.33% (n=8) identifying as transgender, non-binary, or Other (see Appendix F). The disproportionate results are also indicated in the results from the survey questions that asked about demographic data. The overwhelming majority of survey participants who answered this question identified as white (85.33%, n=64), with 2.66% (n=2) of participants identifying as Black/African-American, and 5.33% (n=4) identifying as mixed race or biracial. 2.66% (n=2) of participants identify as Asian, and 4.00% (n=3) identified by some other marker of ethnic heritage (see Appendix G).

For many mentors, graduate school still functions as a weeding-out process to determine who is fit to join the professoriate and who is not. The pervading belief of some established faculty seems to be that graduate students should be initiated into academia though a trial-by-fire for which they are paid inadequately. That was likely never an acceptable or moral way to run things, but it is certainly no longer sustainable in the current context of academic employment. If most students may not land the professorial jobs of their dreams, graduate school has to become a more satisfying, and healthier, experience. Instead, 50 percent of all graduate students drop out of Ph.D.
programs (Cassuto). The combination of lack of supports for people with all kinds of
disabilities, students who are multiply marginalized by other factors, and the overall
punishing culture of academia that causes burnout is driving away smart people who just
want to learn at the highest level possible.

As discussed earlier, in the elaboration on why graduate student assistants may
feel obligated to work more hours than they are paid for, the intellectual and emotional
labor demanded by the role of ‘graduate student’ outside of the assistantship duties is
often influenced by questions around the value of graduate study in itself. I recently had a
conversation with one of my closest peers on this exact matter. We have both struggled,
in various ways and at various points, with motivation. What my friend was currently
struggling with wasn’t the act of writing, or inspiration, or anything like that. It was
trying to see the value in pushing himself to finish his prospectus. Does the expected
benefit — one that isn’t even guaranteed — outweigh all of the normalized stress? Moten
and Harney (2004) describe the way that those who ‘teach for food’ serve as the
university’s undercommons, necessary but despised. Working in this manner differs from
the challenging rites of passage of doctoral study itself, in that it is not something that is
simply passed through on the way to something better: “The moment of teaching for food
is therefore often mistakenly taken to be a stage, as if eventually, one should not teach for
food” (102). In some cases, Katina Rogers suggests, the mentality of working for love
rather than for sustenance removes any discussion about postgraduate employment, as
though those who pursue knowledge for its own sake need not worry about financial
stability, access to health care, and retirement savings (22).
The few studies that have examined stress in graduate and professional students demonstrate these students report stress related to role conflict, time constraint, financial pressure, and lack of family or program support (Hudd et al.). Similar to graduate students, non-traditional students report that the challenge of multiple roles often contributes to their stress (Dill and Henley). When graduate students try to cope with these pressures, they often experience internal conflict. If unresolved, they continually question their decisions and if resolved, the student may still experience physical and mental fatigue, burn out, depression, and guilt over their chosen priorities (Offstein et al). One study found that only 29% of a professional student population sought mental health services. An additional 20% were interested in mental health services but did not seek them because of long waiting lists, scheduling problems, lack of knowledge of the services that were available, seeking services outside the university, time constraints, or stigma (Stecker).

We must also be aware of the number of graduate students who do not self-report or seek an official diagnosis. A 2018 Harvard study concluded that graduate students are over three times more likely than the average American to experience mental health disorders and depression (Barreira et al 11). This number is even higher among international students, graduate students with disabilities, and minorities. The study, which surveyed over 500 students from eight elite universities, also concluded that one in 10 students experienced suicidal thoughts over a two-week period, a result consistent with other recent reports. But only a fraction of these graduate students may be getting
the support they need — why? It may have something to do with the attitudes towards
graduate student labor that are deeply embedded in the structure of higher education.

There is a growing body of literature that focuses on writing centers and writing
labs as places that demand increased emotional labor. Writing consultants regularly
perform emotional labor by suppressing or expressing emotions to welcome clients, and
invoke enthusiasm to cultivate writers’ confidence. Emotional labor is a fundamental part
of writing center tutoring. In sessions with clients — students, faculty members, etc. —
tutors are expected to draw from reserves of kindness and positivity to help writers
develop confidence in their writing ability, if not to become excited and enthusiastic
writers. At times, as almost all writers will understand, this means defusing a writer's
frustrations over an assignment, or disappointment in a grade that was lower than
expected. But, even if no negative emotions are brought into a conference, writing tutors
try to encourage writers' investment in their projects, all the while empathizing with the
challenges of navigating higher education. That empathy is perhaps all the more salient
when the writing tutors are themselves students facing similar stressors. The field of
writing center studies, and adjacent fields of writing studies writ large, composition
studies, and writing program administration, tends to normalize this work rather than
recognize it as labor, possibly because such affective engagements are central to writing
center practice.

Part of the emotional labor carried out by writing center tutors is to suppress their
own anxieties around writing and writing instruction, in order to “feel the appropriate
feeling” (Hochschild 25) for a one-on-one conversation about writing. Behaviors like
these produce positive interpersonal relations, foster community, and resolve conflict and tension; research shows that these behaviors are as vital as cognitive work. Despite this critical importance, emotional labor is rarely considered as intellectual work (Hochschild, 1983; Guy and Newman, 2004), yet ongoing research and the results of this survey confirm what many writing center tutors and teachers can attest to: the main consequence of poorly managed emotional labor is burnout (Wharton, 2009). For graduate student assistants taking on tutoring positions in writing centers, this burnout does not just affect the time they spend in their roles as tutors. Many in the position of educating others have been afflicted with the imposter syndrome at one point or another, commonly a form of competence and social shame where we are overcome with the sense that we don’t know enough, do enough, or have the requisite expertise we believe we “should” have; where we live in constant fear of being exposed for not being the expert our role suggests (Walker 6).

In thinking about emotional labor within academia, it is also important that we highlight just how gendered that labor is. The Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group at the University of Oregon found in a 2017 survey that overall, women do more work-teaching, work-service, and work-advising. Higher education institutions in general are also gendered organizations. As the Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group state, “Historically, universities have been male-dominated, with clear images of the ‘professor’ as a learned man with no obligations aside from his scholarly and university tasks” (229). This, Acker adds, is the ideal “unencumbered worker” (448), an image that has had continuous implications for what
value, if any, is assigned to different types of work in the American university. Tasks that are typically coded as feminine - for example, the care work of dealing with students, the administrative tasks of running departments, organizing meetings and social events, and serving on university committees – are typically less valued than the work that leads to research publications and grants. This difference in the value of certain work over other types has long been reflected in the criteria for tenure and promotion.

In “Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness”, Sara Ahmed writes that the gendered performance of affects “erases the signs of labor under the sign of happiness” (121). She adds that “the claim that women are happy, and that this happiness is behind the work they do, functions to justify gendered forms of labor not as products of nature, law or duty, but as an expression of a collective wish and desire” (121). The emotional labor that women perform, Ahmed suggests, is rarely for their own benefit, but instead serves the greater purpose of meeting the needs of a collective such as an institution or organization. But gender is not the only site that perpetuates inequality within higher education; the number of faculty members of color also decreases at every level of the academic hierarchy pyramid. In a 2004 report, white faculty made up almost 90% of faculty (American Association of University Women 2004). A 2021 report from the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) shows that this number has decreased to 68.8%, but that when compared to the percentage each demographic group makes up of the total U.S. population, minority groups are still consistently underrepresented. When the data in the SREB report is disaggregated to account for teaching at predominantly Black institutions or historically Black colleges and universities, “the representation of
Black faculty falls from 5.5% to just 4%, worsening an already wide representation gap. There are also much larger gaps within specific fields of research, especially in STEM fields” (Bartlebaugh and Abraham 2).

Patricia Matthew’s 2016 edited volume, Written/Unwritten: Diversity and the Hidden Truths of Tenure, reveals the ways that faculty of color are often held to higher standards than their white colleagues with regard to expectations for tenure and promotion. These standards are often unwritten and continually changing for faculty of color. What this means is that very rarely do graduate students from diverse backgrounds have access to professional mentorship from an academic whose life experiences perhaps mirror their own. Increasing the number of minority faculty on campuses can help challenge common stereotypes about who gets to produce and deliver knowledge in our society. Seeing professors of color across their campuses allows students to reconceptualize what a scholar looks like. Additionally, minority faculty are likely to have different research interests and approaches than their white peers, and can offer new perspectives in their fields of study.

Furthermore, Pittman (2012) finds that African American faculty regularly experience microaggressions in the academy, including “microinvalidations with White colleagues and microinsults with White students” (81). This is supported by a comment from the survey data, which touches on another immensely important conversation: the experiences of graduate student assistants of color. One survey participant, when responding to the question about what resources their department provides to handle emotional labor, says that, “as a [sic] international TA of color, emotional labor I carry
teaching majority of white students often cannot really be addressed in those resources—such as microaggression [sic] I experience from my students at times” (see Appendix E). Scholars of color are often expected to carry out the labor of diversity and inclusion programs, and other forms of invisible labor. Tuck and Yang argue that the term ‘invisible labor’ doesn’t adequately describe the work imposed on marginalized people since the labor itself is evidenced in the institution’s ability to function (3).

Graduate school, regardless of the discipline, is an incredibly difficult endeavor. And for some graduate students, particularly students of color, the rigors of the academy can be inherently more challenging than others. As explored at some level in the preceding literature review, academics frequently discuss the ongoing crises in higher education and how to address issues pertaining to pedagogy, the academic job market, student retention and graduation rates, and the incorporation of new methodologies and analyses. It is infrequent that these conversations address how to support scholars of color or how to break down and overcome the undue burden of emotional labor, systemic marginalization, and tokenism, or the micro-aggressions that dominate the halls of the ivory tower. So many ongoing conversations revolve around ‘decoding’ or “uncovering’ the demands of academic disciplines or actively illustrating the responsibilities and expectations of graduate life. But how can higher education actually move forward if it is content leaving its minority members in the shadows and refusing to address the systemic issues at play?

The results and discussion of this research indicate that the primary concerns of graduate student assistants working in writing programs directly correlate to the benefits
included in the terms of their employment contract. In other words, what the survey participants are concerned about only has something to do with the devaluation of their labor in itself, but more to do with the inadequate compensation and peripheral benefits. I believe the data explored here does answer the first research question by providing a list of areas for improvement that can be added to the extant literature. Regarding the second research question — how these concerns are connected to the material and financial resources offered by the institution — these results unequivocally suggest that the overall levels of dissatisfaction faced by graduate student assistants working in writing programs are predominantly the result of stipends that do not currently reflect living costs, the lack of health insurance or poor health insurance coverage, and a lack of consideration for how emotional labor affects workplace behavior.

The following recommendations are adaptable actions that, as a result of this study, I have come to see as valuable in creating and securing success in the labor practices of writing programs. First, we, as a field, should make more visible efforts to police our own profession to address those who abuse the privileges of tenure. I am thinking, as an example, of situations where a tenured professor has a private office that sits unused and unoccupied because the professor either does not teach or is undertaking research overseas. Additionally, if a professor teaching a graduate class plans to use the intellectual work of those graduate students for their own academic purposes, such as writing a book, the graduate students need to be recognized and preferably compensated for their labor. Graduate student advising, as Drew Daniel (2018) writes, “is intimate and intense…It is a partnership but it is also structurally, fundamentally unequal”. This
inequality, Daniel adds, means that the advisee is more vulnerable and more exposed than the advisor to harm because of the institutional force conferred by their respective roles, the power difference at the core of academia as an institution.

In addition to increasing the levels to which tenured professors can be held accountable, another step departments can take is to ensure they are creating environments in which graduate students feel like they can contribute to enacting change. A healthy department ought to be a space where personal accountability and critical honesty, emotional support, and intellectual rigor are not seen as mutually exclusive values. Departments should also be aware of the cultures that they create in terms of how comfortable graduate students feel in raising concerns. Both of these suggestions stem from what was identified in the results of the distributed survey: that writing programs and associated units rarely acknowledge the emotional labor that is an inherent part of graduate assistantships. Emphasizing emotional labor as a byproduct of teaching, particularly for graduate student instructors, should lead to resources established specifically for graduate students. The results of this survey indicate that in general, the only resources available to graduate student instructors are those mental health resources that are available to the entire student body, undergraduate and graduate. I suggest that whether it be at the institutional level, or on a smaller scale within departments, support programs specifically targeted towards graduate student instructors would be beneficial. Such programs would mean that access to mental health support and resources for managing emotional labor is increased, as graduate student instructors would not need to compete with a large number of undergraduate students for help. This also ties back to the
conversation around graduate student instructor identity, and how in many cases, universities view them as students or as employees as a situation calls for; I argue that graduate students and undergraduate students are not the same, therefore should have services and resources designed with each group’s specific needs in mind.

5.4 Unexpected Results

The majority of data gathered in this survey confirmed preexisting notions of how academic labor manifests in graduate student assistants in writing programs. That being said, there were a handful of results that offered a surprising line of investigation. First, that the responses seemed to disproportionately come from doctoral students, not Master’s students. This is evidenced by results from questions 39, 40, and 41. There are a few possible explanations for this. One, that doctoral students, having presumably been in academia for a longer period of time, demonstrate that there is a correlation between academic exposure and awareness of labor concerns. During my own Master’s program, the concept of academic labor wasn’t anywhere near my radar. Second, that the longer one works as a graduate student assistant in writing programs, the more the working conditions become intolerable, or, conversely, the more one becomes conditioned to unfair labor practices.

Another surprising set of results come from the questions about graduate student assistant unionization. 35.64% (n=36) of participants responded that there was a graduate student labor union present at their institutions. I would have expected this number to be higher, given the popularity of unionization as a method of improving working conditions. The last few decades have seen graduate students, both with and without
assistants, face drops in available funding, exploitative working conditions, and narrowing job prospects. One result of these changes, and of the dissatisfaction evident in the gathered data, has been the rise of graduate student worker efforts at public universities. Since the landmark 2016 ruling from the National Labor Relations board, in which graduate student workers won the right to collectively bargain, a new wave of unionization efforts has demonstrated the urgency of these student concerns.

Graduate student unionization efforts in the U.S. began in the 1960s, with the University of Wisconsin-Madison Teaching Assistants’ Association becoming the first graduate worker collective bargaining unit to be recognized in 1970 (Van Ells 4). Collective bargaining refers to the process of an employer and a union negotiating an agreement over wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment, usually followed by the execution of a written contract specifying the agreement reached between the parties. Workers can use collective bargaining agreements to secure a range of employment terms, from prohibiting discrimination to ensuring workers have paid leave for voting.

The disparity between the way graduate student workers are treated and the way colleges and universities benefit from their work is underscored by how those institutions are becoming increasingly dependent on graduate student labor. Between 2005 and 2015, the number of graduate assistants employed rose by 16.7% while the number of tenured and tenure-track faculty grew by only 4.8% (Kroeger et al 1). This has caused higher workloads for graduate students, and fueled the movement to organize. But, despite numerous recent successes by graduate student labor unions, they are far from
commonplace in the American university. 45.54% (n=46) of participants responded that there was not an organization specifically focused on graduate student needs existed at their institutions; another 18.81% (n=19) were unsure, which indicates that even if there was a union present at the home institutions of these nineteen participants, it isn’t visible enough to be of benefit to the wider graduate student body. Another surprising detail from these results is that despite a little over one third of participants (n=36) indicating that there was a graduate student union, only 59.32% were members of said unions. There are a couple of plausible explanations for the low number of survey participants who are part of a graduate student union. The first reason could be the belief that as one concern is addressed and rectified, another one comes to the forefront. For example, to stay within budget, universities may choose to reduce the labor burden by offering graduate student assistants fewer teaching responsibilities, which would not necessarily be an improvement.

The second and perhaps more concerning reason is that collective bargaining has the potential to undermine some of the core missions of graduate study. One of these missions is increasing access to higher education; if unions do manage to increase overall benefits, such as stipends or salaries, universities might reduce the number of students they admit. One other potential pitfall is the removal of personalized instruction, tailored to each candidate's needs. Union efforts might pressure university administrations to treat all graduate students alike, but a doctoral candidate working in a chemistry lab is not the same as a history student working in the archive. Any hesitation or reluctance to join a graduate student labor union that advocates for better working conditions could stem
from a concern that collective bargaining would pressure for one-size-fits-all standards of supervision, ultimately a counterproductive outcome.

5.5 Limitations

A major limitation in this study is that it does not provide a single, free-standing solution that can be universally applied to writing programs nationwide, or indeed to higher education in general, to move them towards more equitable labor practices. The external factors and the bureaucracy of the American university are far too entangled in the everyday running of units and departments to ever allow for significant changes that don't come with a milieu of concessions. Each writing program has its own mission, its own student base, and different faculty makeups. While this project has been able to make broad generalizations about areas that need addressing, each writing program context is unique and therefore the recommendations that follow should be considered in the lens of each specific context. Despite this limitation - that there is no one-size-fits-all approach that can be adopted - the gathered data does provide: evidence that adds to the existing calls to action; a description of what graduate student assistants, by their own admission and in their own words, feel are the highest priorities in terms of academic labor; and a gesture towards adjacent areas of exploration that would only enhance the results here.

Another of the limitations in this project was the absence of additional research methods such as interviews that would add the insights and first person stories from the graduate student assistants that participated in this survey. Many questions arising from the gathered data could have been answered in interviews with the participants, shedding
greater light into the human interactions and dynamic relationships that existed in the writing programs, and how graduate student assistant labor functions on a day to day basis. It is my intent to continue this research by engaging in interviews such as these, using those discussions to create profiles of a number of different writing programs to illustrate the centrality of academic labor concerns to the growth of the field of writing studies.

5.6 Future Research

It is my belief that this research sets the groundwork for further studies to investigate some of the external factors contributing to the levels of satisfaction of graduate student assistants in their roles as student-teachers. Labor concerns exist in many disciplines and departments, so following Bousquet et al’s (2008) suggestion that the labor situation in rhetoric and composition is just one example of a wider issue, there are certain generalizations that can be made outside of rhetoric and composition. For example, it is quite frequently the case that other first year required courses are taught almost exclusively by student instructors — biology labs, for example, or university life courses such as U101. Further research might explore these trends in other departments, arguing that, as has been previously suggested, relying on instructors outside of the tenure line is symptomatic of broader changes within the infrastructures of the university. I would also be interested in comparing the experiences of graduate student assistants in different subjects and fields, hypothesizing that the labor conditions of graduate student assistants in humanities subjects are representative of the devaluation of humanities in general, particularly when compared to STEM subjects.
Another area that this survey only touched on but is worthy of further investigation are the effects of race, gender, and disability on graduate student assistant experiences. While disability was discussed at greater length due to its interrelation to access to health care and health insurance, the effects of race and gender were only briefly mentioned. In further research, I would explore these two demographic factors in more depth, particularly focusing on the connections between race, gender, and emotional labor. Taking up the work of scholars such as Buckingham (2018), Kelly et al (2021), Miller et al (2019) and Moise (2021), there is an abundance of literature to support the conclusion that Black female academics in higher education experience the demand for higher levels of emotional labor. Comments from this survey indicate that graduate student assistants of color face similar issues. In terms of the effects of gender on the experience of graduate student assistants, I would be interested in investigating whether there is a correlation between more positive levels of satisfaction and gender; in other words, do broader social attitudes towards gender in America present themselves in the interactions female graduate student assistants have with their students, for example, which would demand more emotional labor? Additionally, if we take this survey as a representative sample, what explanations exist for why the overwhelming majority of participants were female?

Further study may also expand on the survey results that indicate that the majority of participants in this study attend public four-year institutions. Surveying target populations at types of institution underrepresented by this data, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and private four-year institution may add another layer
to the conversation especially around where funds and endowments are allocated.

Examining the labor practices of writing programs at HBCUs may also contribute to examining how race and emotional labor are connected.

Similarly, I am interested in the effects of regional socio-political and economic policies on graduate student assistant labor, specifically attempts to unionize and employ collective bargaining. A third of survey participants are currently located in the Southeastern states, with an additional 15.38% located in the South or Deep South. Investigating the effects of right-to-work policies, frequently found in states in these regions, on labor practices could provide scholarship that contributes to conversations happening at a broader level about the state of higher education in the United States. Comparing the results from this set of participants to the results from the 38.46% of participants who currently live in the Midwest might also provide new direction for this research. It would also be productive to do a more detailed study of state political orientation and the effects on graduate student assistant satisfaction.

5.7 Final Thoughts: Beyond the Ivory Tower

The omnipresent incursion of neoliberal values in higher education is shown as the cause of the exploitation of academic labor, the diminishing of academic freedom, and the proletarianization of graduate student employees and contingent faculty. This dissertation has attempted to make a call for university faculty, students, parents, politicians, and all other stakeholders to make efforts to solidify the academic faculty voice to guarantee faculty rights, and highlights the need for collaboration to reclaim academic labor, especially to improve the working conditions of graduate student
assistants. If those steps are taken, then I see this project not as a beginning but as a continuation of the important work previous scholars have undertaken. This continuation reaffirms the fields of writing studies, composition, and rhetoric as fundamentally important to academic labor scholarship. To the body of knowledge that already exists, I add that each program in the discipline is the site of much human activity including social, academic and labor relationships — all of which can be studied and learned from at the disciplinary level. I don't mean to suggest that this conception of the fields is new in itself — of course it's not. Instead, I suggest reinforcing that how we think of labor across the discipline (as a site of study that can be compared, contrasted, and analyzed) is a valuable concept that adds shape to the intellectual and organizational space we occupy.

In such systems as we are currently facing, profits are earned at the expense of workers themselves, and the reluctance of the neoliberal institution to facilitate access to the resources that would better equip workers to do their jobs indicates a disinclination on the part of university administration to make significant changes. If we listen to what is being said by graduate students, by adjuncts and other contingent groups, there is not only the potential to change the detrimental labor practices that now seem predominant in higher education, but for compositionists, rhetoricians, and writing studies scholars, there may also be the opportunity to rescue our field from the grip of neoliberal cuts.

While it is important to keep in mind the limitations of this single study, I have provided here suggestions for key groups of stakeholders within the writing program ecology that may start to bring the labor conditions of graduate student assistants to the forefront of the conversation. Graduate student instructors, contingent faculty, writing
program administrators, and department administrators cannot, by themselves, affect or create larger policy at the institutional level. One of the central arguments here is that writing programs serve as an exemplar of academic labor conditions in the wider university, therefore creating more equitable labor practices in writing programs could in essence demonstrate the potential of applying such changes to other departments. At the very least, those that work in writing programs could most certainly contribute to the knowledge base with which any institutional policies on academic labor are created.

Conversations about graduate student labor are not likely to go away anytime soon; similarly, the structures of higher education and the attitudes of university administrators do not seem to be changing either, even in the face of increased activism. As these concluding remarks took shape at the end of January, graduate students at Temple University took to the picket lines after over a year of stalled negotiations between the university and the graduate student union. The union is accusing the school of paying wages that fail to cover Philadelphia's cost of living. The striking graduate student employees are demanding a living wage, improved healthcare for dependents and families, and better working conditions: three areas for improvement that this survey indicates are increasingly needed. What is devastating for the Temple University graduate student employees, and indicative of one of the key reasons these issues are ongoing, is that the University’s response to union action was to withhold tuition and healthcare benefits from striking graduate students. Despite political figures\(^2\) at both the federal and

\(^2\) Senator Bob Casey (D-PA) wrote the following on Twitter: “This retaliation tactic by Temple is unacceptable. The right to organize—and to strike—is foundational in a democracy”. The original Tweet can be found here: https://twitter.com/SenBobCasey/status/1623472034192797696?s=20.
local levels indicating that these union-busting actions were simultaneously immoral and
counterproductive, Temple University administrators continue to hold out. With Temple
undergraduate students now threatening to stage walk-outs in support of their peers,
perhaps the negotiations will start to move in a direction that addresses some of these
graduate student employees’ concerns.

The people at the department and program-specific level cannot truly dictate what
goes on at the level of personal interactions an individual choice, but they can certainly
encourage those solutions we see in the literature, and the solutions indicated by the
sample population in this survey, to create supportive programs and departments in which
the labor concerns of graduate student assistants are taken seriously. On graduate
education, Tom Brokaw said, “Think of it as your ticket to change the world”. This
project has been a labor of love — pun mostly intended. Love not only for my field: for
my fellow graduate students and graduate student assistants, for my contingent co-
workers, and also for the potential of higher education to carry us all to a more equitable
future.
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EMAIL REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE WITH SURVEY DISTRIBUTION

Good [morning/afternoon/evening],

I hope the [start/end] of the [semester/year] has gone well for you. I am writing to ask if you are able to assist me in distributing my dissertation research survey to graduate students in your department, and in associated programs. The purpose of my research is to determine the experiences of graduate student assistants working in writing programs, focusing specifically on their labor.

I would be happy to send you something which can be forwarded directly to any venues that you think are appropriate.

Many thanks in advance, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

Lily Howard-Hill, MA
PhD Candidate (ABD), Composition & Rhetoric
Department of English Language & Literature
University of South Carolina
APPENDIX B

DISSERTATION SURVEY QUESTIONS

Section 1: Determining Eligibility Criteria

1. Do you live and work in the United States?
   - Yes
   - No

2. Are you a graduate student?
   - Yes
   - No

3. Do you currently work in a writing program? This writing program does not need to be housed in the Department of English.
   - Yes
   - No

4. Do you currently hold a graduate assistantship (teaching or research)? If you currently hold more than one graduate assistantship position, please answer Yes.
   - Yes
   - No

Section 2: General Assistantship Questions

5. Which of the following best describes the institution you currently attend?
   - Four-year public university
• Four-year private university
• Liberal arts college
• Historically Black College or University
• Community college

6. What kind(s) of graduate assistantship do you have? Please select all that apply.
• Teaching
• Research
• Both
• Writing Center
• Other

7. How many contracted hours per week is your assistantship? If you hold more than one assistantship position, please indicate the total number of hours you are contracted to work per week.
• Less than 5
• 5-10
• 10-15
• More than 15

8. Do you teach a course that is part of a required sequence? E.g. first year writing, first year English, first year composition, etc.
• Yes
• No

9. Are there any labor unions that represent graduate assistants at your institution?
10. If you answered ‘yes’ to the previous question, are you a member of such a labor union?

- No
- Yes

**Section 3: Institution Financial and Material Support**

“Benefits” is a term used in the following questions to refer to any sort of compensation or provision (necessary for work or otherwise) provided by the employer to employees.

12. Do you receive financial benefits as part of your assistantship?

- Yes
- No

13. If yes, what form do these benefits take? Please select all that apply.

- Salary or stipend
- Insurance benefits
- Reduced tuition/tuition abatements
- Reduced cost or complementary parking passes
- Other financial benefits (please specify).

14. Do you receive material benefits as part of your assistantship?

- Yes
- No
15. If yes, what form do these benefits take? Please select all that apply.

- Single office space
- Shared office space
- Textbooks
- Access to reduced cost or complementary printing services
- Teaching supplies (board markers, composition books, stationary)
- Other material benefits (please specify).

16. On a scale of one to ten, with one being ‘Not At All Accessible’ and ten being ‘Very Accessible’, how accessible do you feel these material benefits are?

17. Why do you feel your assistantship’s material benefits warrant the rating you provided?

18. What other financial or material benefits would you like to see included as part of your graduate assistantship benefit package?

Section 4: Graduate Student Labor

19. If you have a teaching assistantship, how many courses are you expected to teach per academic year?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more
20. How many total hours per week does your graduate assistantship cover? This information may have been included on your acceptance or offer letter at the beginning of your degree.

- Less than 5 hours
- Between 5 and 10 hours
- Between 10 and 15 hours
- More than 15 hours

21. How many hours per week do you actually spend as part of your assistantship, including unpaid time spent preparing for the work you have to do? This includes time spent planning lessons, grading papers, and responding to student emails, as well as time spent delivering lessons.

- Less than 5 hours
- Between 5 and 10 hours
- Between 10 and 15 hours
- More than 15 hours

22. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) defines ‘emotional labor’ as managing, suppressing, or containing one’s emotions within the workplace to better suit or match the needs, demands, and expectations of the employer. In your opinion, is emotional labor part of the work you do as a graduate assistant?

- Yes
- No
23. Does your department or institution offer any resources for managing emotional labor?
   - Yes
   - No
   - I’m not sure

24. If you answered ‘yes’ to the previous question, what sorts of resources does your department or institution offer?

**Section 5: Determining Overall Graduate Student Satisfaction**

[These questions were answered on a 5-point Likert scale from Very Dissatisfied to Very Satisfied].

25. How satisfied are you with the financial benefits you receive as a graduate assistant?

26. How satisfied are you with the material benefits you receive as a graduate assistant?

27. How satisfied are you with the number of hours for which you are paid?

28. How satisfied are you with the number of hours you work in comparison to the number of hours for which you are paid?

29. In your role as a graduate assistant, how satisfied are you with the benefits you receive and how you are treated by your employer at the unit or department level?

30. In your role as a graduate assistant, how satisfied are you with the benefits you receive and how you are treated by your employer at the institutional level?

31. What is your overall level of satisfaction with the collective benefits you may receive in your role as a graduate student?

**Section 6: Participant Demographic Data Collection**

213
[Responses were not required to the following questions. Any data gathered from the following questions may be used in future research. Most questions allowed participants to type in an answer in their own words should they choose to do so.]

32. What is your age?

33. What is your gender identity?

34. Please specify your ethnicity.

35. Are you a person with a disability?
   1. Yes
   2. No

36. If yes, how would you describe your disability? (E.g., visual impairment; limited mobility; neurodivergence; learning disability)

38. Which part of the United States do you currently work/study in? (E.g., Southeastern, Midwest)

39. How long have you held a graduate assistantship?
   • Less than one year
   • 1-3 years
   • 3-6 years
   • More than six years

40. How many graduate programs have you been enrolled in?
   • 1
   • 2
   • 3 or more
41. How many institutions have you attended as a graduate student?

- 1
- 2
- 3 or more
APPENDIX C

RAW DATA FROM SURVEY QUESTION 17

Q17 - Why do you feel your assistantship’s material benefits warrant the rating you provided?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>216</td>
<td>we do not have access to teaching supplies or funds for supplies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>material benefits are easy to access and readily available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>its a dark cold dirty basement where everything is broken and smells bad. the wifi is spotty and there's no cell service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>While we receive health insurance, it's only for the duration of our contracts (9 months, usually; 11 or 12 on some special contracts) and it doesn't include vision or dental. Parking is also not included, which has been a problem for many grad students with mobility needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When I was a TA, office space was weirdly and inconsistently allocated, so that the process of seniority allowing us say and placement into nicer spaces did not happen without me making requests and then finally volunteering to give up my office space all together (as about the only 6th year TA with a cubicle). The other office and classroom supplies were generously provided, though copier access information was rarely consistently disseminated. I think some of this was the regular change confusing things, but it was frustrating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We're not always informed about having these benefits; the more time I spend here in my program, the more I know what I have access to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We still have to pay student fees and our stipend is considered low pay compared to similar programs stipends. Paying student fees ends up taking a significant chunk out of the stipend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We have an English Graduate Organization in our department that advocates for graduate students, including access to materials and resources (such as pedagogical tools like software, markers, etc). The organization's board works hard for all grad students in the department.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
UA provides just enough to live on. We have a grad lounge, but it shares a printer with the rest of the department—we don't have much to ourselves. Furthermore, though the assistantship assignments are flexible, they rival carrying a part-time job or two in time commitment on top of being a full-time graduate student.

They're adequate, sharing an office with 3 other people isn't ideal though.

They just aren't available when I teach online as a GTA

They are provided with no additional qualifications needed

They are provided to us easily and by default; little extra work is required to access these material benefits.

They are provided as part of the orientation process to the program.

There's very little instruction or clear communication about what benefits we have access to. I've had to figure most things out on my own.

There isn't a lot of guidance when you start about where your office is or how to use the space

There aren't very many material benefits, and they are provided explicitly at the start of training/assignment.

There are very limited resources and I have received textbooks weeks late in the past.

The shared office space is in a different building than the English department, and the cubicle style makes it unpleasant to spend time in.

The shared office space is in a dark cold dirty basement with no windows and no cell service

The shared office space is available and accessible via elevator. However because it is not close to my classroom and is shared by 6 other students, I do not find it very useful as an office space.

The shared office is in a good location.

The only benefits are textbooks and printing, but both are limited.
The offices have not been updated in any way since my mother was an undergraduate at this institution in 1976. The furniture was probably old then. Our offices are tiny shared cubicles with furniture from the 60s that are (literally! we hired safety inspectors to confirm this! and then nothing happened!!) fire hazards and health risks. The mold is so bad that at least one person actually had to file workers' comp.

The office space itself is in the attic of the department building, which is only accessible by stairs. This is a problem for students visiting during office hours.

The office space is in the attic or the basement (in Louisiana of all places), you have to ask like 12 ppl for your materials, and they still charge you 1500 in fees per semester.

The office benefits are very easy to access, however, I also have access to free printing services which are more of a hassle. They can only be used from one computer and one printer, both of which only work part of the time.

Everything is easily accessible, but it's not necessarily private or preferred, hence the 8.

The benefits are not enough. We print teaching materials from our own pockets because the textbooks aren't worth using. The office space is not private and makes work difficult.

The benefits are accessible and I appreciate that I am not required to jump through hoops to utilize them.

Some are made readily available (we receive textbooks for the course(s) we teach, and one need only request an office), but others are accessible on a less-official basis (like asking nicely, and not too often, for some markers).

Sharing space with 5 other GAs makes it difficult to study or meet with students

Resources are available to us, but they are not always advertised. I often find out that we have access to certain things after asking if they are available or complaining about not having certain things available to senior staff members.

Resources are available but the process to acquire them is unclear

Printing is supposed to be complimentary, but we've received emails telling us to limit our printing.
Our printer has been broken for a few months.

Our department's building is pretty terrible--I've had two friends file worker's comp claims because of mold issues and injuries from slipping on ice. This is more of a campus than departmental issue. However, I have access to free printing in a computer lab in our building; I am given copies of all textbooks I assign; I have a shared office.

Offices are easy to ask for. There are supplies available easily. Fewer supplies though than the school I used to adjunct at.

Office space is not very accessible - sometimes shared by many people in a tight space without great access to things like gender neutral bathrooms, lighting that works for access needs, chairs that are comfortable, etc. But we do get some access to teaching supplies (very limited) and printing services.

No health care, dental plan, or anything like that. Minimal benefits

My office was assigned to me and the key was easy to get, but there's some disagreement/confusion on whether we have access to the office over the summer.

My department makes sure what material benefits are available and how to access it through emails pretty frequently. I feel like I can also email the staff to ask at all time.

Material benefits aren't terrible, but they could be better or easier to access.

It’s markers and chalk and no one told me about them for the first year and a half.

It's an office. I have access to it.

It seems like the pandemic has reduced material benefits.

If you aren't teaching in-person, there aren't many tangible benefits to the material benefits you are afforded.

I'm not sure how you're defining "accessible" here, but if you mean how readily I can get to those things, reasonably so. Our office printer is currently out of commission so it takes an extra step to get things printed.

There are some paperwork and hoops to get them, but I haven't seen accessibility issues prevent people from getting them.
I'm fairly happy with my shared office. It's more than accessible: the graduate students very much have control over the space, and we have a small budget with which to update our technology (scanners, shared laptops) and furniture and make the space more welcoming to our students for conferences. The only issue is that our individual spaces are just small cubicles - they suffice, but they're not much compared to the individual offices other departments' grad students have.

I work in an open "bull-pen" type space with a bunch of open room and a "L" shape row of desks for grad assistants. It can get loud which impacts my work.

I understand "accessible" to mean accessible to people with disabilities. I have both visible and invisible disabilities. My office is on an upper level in a building with an unreliable elevator and I have sometimes been stuck in the building. The furniture is surplus from the 50s and not ergonomic.

I think the program does try to provide for the GTAs, but I don't think the material benefits necessarily make up for out low stipend that barely covers the cost of living in my city.

I share a small office with 3 other GTAs, which feels crowded, especially when there are in-person conferences (that is one reason that I have switched to Zoom conferences). The textbook is not particularly friendly to new GTAs since it does little to guide new GTAs in how to teach composition or to understand concepts beyond the understanding of their students (I, luckily, have 10 years of experience teaching composition at this point).

I really enjoy my shared office space, and the office space itself includes what I expected. However, the other material benefits listed above would be nice additions to the office space. For example, our department does have a printer that we are all free to use, but it has been broken for a long time. Teaching supplies are probably available somewhere, but I've never known how to access them.

I make frequent use of my office and the textbook I needed for teaching was placed in my mailbox well before the beginning of the semester.

I feel that the shared office space can be distracting. I don’t usually do my work or see students there because there are a lot of people working and talking at the same time.

I don't understand what you're asking. They're physically/temporally accessible when I need them with few exceptions.
I don't have to compete for them, and I have unlimited access to them.

I can only access my office during writing center hours and if someone is available to unlock it.

I barely thought of them as benefits. They just exist in the space I go to everyday.

Having a dedicated on-campus work space is a considerable advantage for a GTA position.

I feel like we get about what you'd expect at a university of this size.
**APPENDIX D**

**RAW DATA FROM SURVEY QUESTION 18**

**Q18 - What other financial or material benefits would you like to see included as part of your graduate assistantship benefit package?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More textbook access.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textbooks. I just spent 1/3 of my monthly stipend on required textbooks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better healthcare benefits, faculty/staff parking passes, representation in decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The parking passes at my institution are very expensive; it would be nice to be given one for free. A waiver for course fees would also be appreciated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better parking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year-round healthcare, protections against overwork, elimination of student fees, increased waiver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like for the graduate assistantship to pay closer to a living wage; rent in the town my university is located in has gone up 100 dollars every year, and wages have not matched that increase, meaning that I have had to take out exorbitant student loans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coverage of student fees would be big - some departments cover them on our campus and others do not and they are very expensive. Reduced parking costs, greater availability of teaching supplies, and more accessible office spaces would be great.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to see a pay schedule the covered the entire year, rather than 10 months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A complimentary parking pass would be practically life-changing. With my current GTA assignment, I am often working hours that exceed expectations while doing difficult labor. I would appreciate additional compensation for this work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A stipend that reflects the cost of living. Currently monthly CoL is &gt;80% of stipend, and additional employment isn't permitted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking is a slight issue on campus. There is not a close parking area to the building where the offices are held, and a parking pass is fairly expensive to purchase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Insurance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Higher stipend amounts and a free parking pass. The stipend is $1800 a month and the rent rate for a single apartment takes half of the stipend amount. Our health insurance could also cover more. I've had to be referred to a higher-paying doctor several times, and each visit is about $200.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>None at this time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heath insurance, reduced costs for international students, especially ones from East.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and dental insurance, free parking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>single Office space, better parking, supplies,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance, parking pass/discount, higher stipend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funded health insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care (at least a check up once a year and mental health people to talk to) and no fee bills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reduced cost books and materials for class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unshared office space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking pass, health insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>higher stipend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to see our stipend increase with the cost of living. More comprehensive dental insurance. Individually assigned laptops that we could keep over the summer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More money would be swell.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>better healthcare access; higher rate of pay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Included dental insurance (currently it is provided at a discounted rate)

reduced or free parking

My institution waives tuition but not fees. They provide us computers to use but limit our ability to update them (for four years now I have not been able to use my school-issued laptop to administer the LMS for classes I teach because IT won't update the software required to run it). Across the university, graduate assistant stipends range from $19,000 to $60,000; some departments' assistantships are .75 time while others refuse to allow more the .5 time. My department's funding expires after 5 years; additional time is subject to whether the incoming cohort has seats available after April 15.

I would like to see:
increased dental benefits (ours includes cleanings but nothing else)
increased vision benefits (ours includes exams but nothing else)
fee waiver
extended eligibility of funded years
updated tech or a technology stipend
stipend parity across the school
revised funding extension process
retirement savings

Better insurance/health coverage, more teaching materials (slides for lectures over required topics), funding for conference attendance.

full tuition reimbursement.


Health insurance, payment of student fees, free parking pass, increased stipend.
1) Real pay. ABDs don't take classes, but the university requires us to register for empty-credit courses, then "pays" us a tuition waiver for those empty-credit classes, which we still have to pay fees for - and acts like that's a benefit. 2) Parking: we pay $200-500 per semester to park so we can teach (and not take classes). 3) Health benefits

Candidly, I just believe that the stipend should be higher. Other material and financial benefits do not matter nearly as much as my paycheck. I appreciate the funding I am receiving, but it definitely is not anything close to a livable wage or even a part-time livable wage.

Tuition adjustment or parking passes

Some kind of a retirement account. And health care benefits.

My university's grad students are currently advocating with our administration for increases in both stipends and health benefits. We currently have a very low stipend (only $18k per year) well below the cost of living, and we do not have health coverage during the summer. I think an increase that adjusts with the cost of living is more than fair.

We are part of an urban campus, but not a lot of housing options nearby and very little public transportation. A parking pass is around $800 per academic year, and otherwise we rely on metered parking. It's a financial burden for many graduate students, so parking benefits would be exceptionally helpful.

Higher pay, waived university fees (are currently up to $900 some semesters)
| 1. health insurance |
| 2. increased stipends to match/exceed other departments' GA stipends for same work |
| 3. access to a union or union-like organization for graduate students |
| 4. GA representation in department/school/university meetings that make decisions that affect us |
| 5. legal protection for us to have second jobs outside of the GA-ship (so many of us do because this isn't a living wage but we aren't allowed to mention it; the stigma has been created by the entity that requires us to break the rule in the first place) |
| 6. shared office spaces that locks/is more secure |
| 7. at events with free food, more options or care for the many GA's that have dietary needs and also want free food |
| 8. anonymous options for us to complain or address issues within the department when HR doesn't really do much for us |
| 9. option to opt out of paying for students services like the gym which many of us cannot use |
| 10. more care towards those with chronic illnesses during a pandemic (MASK) |
| 11. training with technology the department requires (Blackboard, Mac &gt; Windows products, Adobe, etc.) |

**Health insurance and fair pay for teaching**

I am happy with the stipend where it is, but I know that people with families struggle to live on the money (24k/year). So, I think that the best thing would be an increase to the stipend.

**A living wage**

**Better dental and vision. Higher stipends. Discounts for computers.**

**Access to parking near our building; better wages; a union**
I wish that I had access to a shared or private office space on campus—there's really no good shared space for graduate students to gather even though we teach and regularly meet with students. Other departments/programs have spaces for graduate students, but the Department of English does not, which probably parallels the institution's general de-valuing of English and writing in general. The current workspace for graduate students is a condemned former panhellenic building and we're being moved at the end of the semester, location TBD.

Increased stipend. I live in one of the fastest growing cities in the U.S., making our living situation more dire given our material and financial conditions while our stipends have not increased despite rapidly increasing cost of living.

Vision insurance, paid summer work,

Gas assistance for commuters

No graduate student fees (these are thousands of dollars each semester), better insurance coverage with dental and vision included by default, guaranteed summer pay.

Access to a printer for class material.

A parking pass. I've worked as an adjunct at other colleges and always received a parking pass. Also, a higher stipend. We're asked to teach classes, provide supplies, pay university fees, and take on the course load of a full-time student. Even with a second job in addition to the stipend, it's not enough to cover cost of living.

free parking pass

I wish we got our fees (upwards of 1k a semester) taken care of and we're given free parking (upwards of 300 a semester). I also wish our stipend was higher

We need a raise. My university recently gave a raise to the GTAs and RAs in all its STEM programs, but not any humanities or social sciences. This isn't the writing program's fault, but it is very frustrating.
Printing! English programs that charge for printing are unbelievable.

A higher stipend would be magnificent.

No student fees for TAs.

Our health insurance covers virtually nothing. Our salary is a fraction of what we would need to make a living wage in the city we are located in.

Certainly reduced rates on parking passes. We have an unreliable local bus system, and yearlong passes are $250.

MORE MONEY

More money

A living wage, first and foremost.

Parking assistance, vision and dental; increased stipend (currently lower than cost of living for the area)

Health insurance (including vision and dental), maternity/paternity/parental leave, sick time.
## APPENDIX E

### RAW DATA FROM SURVEY QUESTION 24

Q24 - If you answered ‘yes’ to the previous question, what sorts of resources does your department or institution offer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some camaraderie events and celebrations of holidays</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling services are available to us.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling services, but they are frequently at capacity and there is a limit on individual sessions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual and group therapy are available to all students; however, individual therapy appointments are typically only available for once a month.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have access to some type of workshop on occasion and are recommended to use mental health services on campus - so very minimal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We technically have a mental health services center but it's very inaccessible.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They expect us to sign up for counseling or therapy, which is critically understaffed at our university.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:1 mentorship with professors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My institution offers counseling and psychiatric services for students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They offer graduate student specific resources for mental health and stuff. But as a international TA of color, emotional labor I carry teaching majority of white students often cannot really be addressed in those resources--such as microaggression I experience from my students at times</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal communication, coaching sessions, and a limited amount of psychological support per academic year.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student counseling services, lifestyle workshops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling, not any different from other students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
there's a graduate student support group offered by the counseling center (this semester it was canceled as I was the only attendee for 5 weeks); professors in my department offer personal condolences if I am seen struggling or complain in the office; there's an ombuds office; there's a graduate student hub my university offered this year; I and a few other GAs have started a graduate student organization for our department this year and we hope to institute a GA-ship mentor program for incoming GAs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The counseling center though they have very limited availability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited counseling/therapy that grad students can access during the school year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The GTAs are required to take a class called &quot;Teaching College Composition&quot; in which we spend a lot of time talking about experiences as they're happening and troubleshooting problems. Our professor encourages us to talk about write about the emotional labor we're putting in. This is the closest thing we have to any departmental support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapy and many professors in my program are open to discussing this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe the University offers formal services that would fit (mental health services, counseling, etc.), but I have not used them. There are also mentoring programs, both within my First-Year English program and my English Department, although these ironically do place more emotional labor on the experienced grad students who mentor newer grad students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I answered not sure, but I think it's worth noting that I believe the institution HAS resources on emotional labor (Counseling and health services) but those aren't necessarily promoted as part of our administrative work (as in &quot;here's a resource to help you do your job&quot;); they're more for assistance needed as a student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 free counseling session via the university.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q33 - What is your gender identity?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cisgender Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (she/her)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cisgender female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cisgender woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cis male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-binary, woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nonbinary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-binary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cis woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cis female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cisgender woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She/her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nonbinary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cis-woman; gender apathetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cisgender female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nobinary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cisgender female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nonbinary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cishef female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cisgender female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX G

RAW DATA FROM SURVEY QUESTION 34

Q34 - Please specify your ethnicity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black African</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/non-hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white/caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/White (mixed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian immigrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American, mixed-race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not hispanic/latinx; white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>biracial- Latina &amp; white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashkenazi, Sephardi, white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
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235
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Origin</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (not Hispanic or Latino)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<td>white</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>White</td>
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APPENDIX H

RAW DATA FROM SURVEY QUESTION 36

Q36 - If yes, how would you describe your disability? (E.g., visual impairment; limited mobility; neurodivergence; learning disability)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neurodivergence, chronic illness</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>neurodivergence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>undiagnosed neurodivergence, anxiety, depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not sure if this counts, but anxiety and depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neurodivergence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neurodivergence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurodivergence and chronically ill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability caused by United States’ cultural xenophobia and anti immigrant violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>visual impairment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurodivergent (ADHD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic illness, anxiety, ADHD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neurodivergence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limited mobility; neurodivergence; depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do have a severe mental disorder, but I don't really identify as a person with a disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurodivergence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mental illness, visual impairment, and physical chronic illness that sporadically affects life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type 1 diabetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invisible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPTSD, neurodivergence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADHD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing impairment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have PTSD which includes things like panic attacks that disrupt my day and nightmares that make it difficult for me to sleep. Both of these affect my performance as a student and a teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic illness and chronic pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual impairment, neurodivergent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neurodivergence and autoimmune disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurodivergence, chronic pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intermittent, flaring fatigue and pain impacting mobility and cognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual impairment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurodivergence &amp; chronic physical illness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>