

FORUM

NEWSLETTER OF THE NON-TENURE-TRACK FACULTY SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

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CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION

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From the Editor

Janice Albert

Last summer, under the headline “Less Whining, More Teaching” (August 3, 2001, A12), *The Chronicle of Higher Education* ran a story about Wonder Woman. The *Chronicle* photographed WW vested in camouflage, arms akimbo, framed against a blue sky. Are those actually cartridges under her right middle finger? The soldierly vocabulary of the photo evoked the myth of the lone gunfighter, but her broad smile gave a Disney quality to the role. She seemed to like being alone; she seemed to be fine without community.

Describing her as an adjunct who pulls down \$50,000 a year teaching twelve courses, *The Chronicle* apparently thought so much of her approach that it sponsored a four-hour online chat with her (as well as giving her a splendid opportunity to advertise her self-published book). The message was strong—entrepreneurial skills will put you on target toward a lasting career. Only wimps need other people.

This point of view is not ours. While we applaud innovative strategies in getting and keeping teaching jobs, we continue to believe that there is strength in community. Many of the problems new faculty face are caused by institutional decisions that must be addressed through dialogue within the institution itself. This is not glamorous work, and you don't get to wear a great costume while doing it. You certainly don't get to carry a gun. Nonetheless, this is where lasting change occurs—within Academic Senates and department meetings, through persistent and patient articulation of the problems and solutions.

The purpose of this newsletter is to give you a chance to share your victories, to remember to be stouthearted, and to remember that you are not alone.

About Forum

Forum is published twice a year by the Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Special Interest Group of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. As editor, I welcome you to submit news items, book reviews, editorials, and/or articles related to non-tenure-track faculty in college English or composition courses. Submissions for the fall issue should be received no later than May 1; for the winter issue, the deadline is September 1. Note: Submissions will not be returned.

You may submit your work electronically, via e-mail or an e-mail attachment, or through U.S. mail. For e-mail submissions, address your work to JMAAlbert@aol.com and put the words "Forum article" somewhere in your subject line. If you choose U.S. mail, please send one hard copy of your submission(s) to:

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For both e-mail and U.S. mail submissions, include the following information in a cover note:

- your name
- your title(s)
- your institution(s)
- home address and phone number; institutional address(es) and phone number(s)
- if applicable, venue(s) where submission was published or presented previously

For additional guidelines or information about *Forum*, contact Janice Albert at the address provided or at (510) 839-1140.

It is the policy of NCTE in its journals and other publications to provide a forum for the open discussion of ideas concerning the content and the teaching of English and the language arts. Publicity accorded to any particular point of view does not imply endorsement by the Executive Committee, the Board of Directors, or the membership at large, except in announcements of policy, where such endorsement is clearly specified. Similarly, opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor, the Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Special Interest Group, or the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

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Just as this newsletter is sponsored by an inclusive professional group, we encourage you to share your ideas with others by attending the Non-Tenure-Track Special Interest Group meeting at CCCC in Chicago, and by writing for the newsletter *Forum*.

In this issue, we feature: a team-written article from Madison Area Technical College; a University of Connecticut TA's advice about how to respond when student e-mail infringes on your private life; and a checklist of questions, written by a dean at Modesto Junior College in California, that you need to ask when orienting yourself to a new school. Our September issue introduced book reviews of special interest to adjuncts, part-timers, and non-tenure-track faculty everywhere. In this issue, Pat Morgan reviews John H. McWhorter's *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*. We continue to believe that many people working together will achieve more than a single person working alone.

**Part-time Adjunct Faculty
Self-orientation, or Digging in the
College Information Mine**

Margo Sassé

I was a graduate student teaching part-time. The class was in a high school, and the room smelled like adolescents. The college students, all returning adults, spilled out of the tab-chairs, and there was no coffee. But, I did have a mentor—the professor who recruited me. Years later, as I organized orientations for adjunct faculty, I thought back to that semester and what I

needed to know. If you are fortunate enough to work at a college that provides orientations or mentors, take advantage of them. Ask if there is a faculty handbook and, before you read it, check the date it was last revised.

If your college doesn't offer an orientation or have a handbook, ask the division chair for a mentor or contact; if there is no one, ask if you should come to the chair or someone else with your questions. In my experience, the division secretary can answer all your questions, but he/she can be overwhelmed at certain times of year, so you need to be very respectful and appreciative of the help.

In case you aren't sure what you need to know, this checklist is a point of departure for your information mining:

The Course

Check the catalog for the course description.

Check the Web site for an online version or a faculty site with a syllabus.

Ask your contact for:

- the curriculum outline

- a syllabus or sample syllabus

- the name of someone teaching the same course (see if they will share the syllabus)

- a textbook list

- bookstore forms for ordering texts and desk copies of texts

- forms for duplicating

- sources of chalk or dry markers

- sources for AV or computing support

- forms for in-class speakers and field trips

- instructions on getting a Web site mounted

- procedures for how to put books and other materials on reserve in the library

- procedures for how to schedule orientations to computer labs, the library, or other facilities for your class.

The Syllabus

Include the following:

- the assignments and how you will grade

- assignment deadlines

- how you will deal with absences and tardiness

- your visitor policy, including dogs and children

- your policy on cell phones and beepers

- the protocol for class discussion

- alternatives in case a student is offended by an assignment

- alternative meeting place if you cannot use the classroom (cases such as bomb threats)

a note about where to find college policies on academic dishonesty and student conduct (e.g., Web site, catalog, student handbook)
information on academic support services such as tutoring, advising, writing or math centers, and open computer labs
your contact information

Support

Is there somewhere to meet individually with students?
How do you get voice mail? e-mail?
Where is your paper mailbox?
Will you be evaluated and, if so, how?
Will students evaluate you? If so, how?
Is there a desk, computer, or office you can use?
Where and when can you get materials duplicated? How much lead time is required?
Is there technology training?
Are there staff development opportunities?
Is there support for attending conferences?

Rules and Regulations

When and where will you receive an official class roster?
What must you do with it?
How do you add/drop students?
When and where must you turn in records at the end of the semester?
May you post grades? Where? In what format?
If you have an emergency in the class, whom do you contact and how? Is the procedure the same for night classes?
Where do you get a parking permit?
What keys are you entitled to and how do you get them?
What sick leave are you entitled to? Does it accumulate from one term to the next? How do you call in sick?
Whom can your family call in case of emergencies?
Do you need a TB test, fingerprints, DMV printout?
Does Personnel have all your paperwork?
How do you obtain a completed copy of your contract?
How and when will you be paid?
Do you have to pay union dues?
Do you have to contribute to a retirement system?
Are you eligible for any benefits?

Are there any perks such as gym memberships, symphony tickets, or software discounts?

Can you have a 403(b) set up?

Faculty Governance

Who is your representative on the faculty senate or the union?

Where is there a copy of the contract?

Does your division have regular meetings and are you allowed or required to attend?

Remember to be unfailingly polite to your dean, the mentor, and all support staff; never tell them how other colleges do these things or how to do their jobs. Let them know you appreciate the information and help. If they have been genuinely helpful, please send a thank you to them and a note to their supervisor.

Margo Sassé writes long choppy sentences because her father a German was. The end place the verb is. Despite her conviction that pencil and paper are the yin/yang of light and dark and the connection between writing and thinking is an old and respected one, she uses a word processor because she spells idiosyncratically and her handwriting is illegible to one and all.

E-Mail 101: Learning Where to Draw the Line with Undergraduates

Amy Albert

I am beginning to see the downside of e-mail.

When I enrolled in graduate school two years ago, I was a huge proponent of online communication. After all, this form of communication meant I could send, with one quick stroke of the enter key, a change-of-address update to thirty e-mail accounts of friends and family. I could send e-cards. I could shop. And when I began graduate classes, I found that I could communicate with my professor by e-mail, even to the extent of e-mailing assignments! What bliss. I could type away at research reports right up until the deadline, and instead of furiously trying to find a printer that worked (and had paper), and then delivering the paper in person, I could just attach my report to an e-mail and be done with it. As long as I hit the enter key by the deadline, I was home free. I thought e-mail was great and couldn't imagine why more people didn't use it more often.

When I began to use it with my own students, however, I discovered the downside of e-mail. As a Teaching Assistant (TA), I worked for professors (four over a

period of two years) who would lecture, establish the rules, and create the assignments. I had the responsibility of leading discussion sessions, enforcing the rules, and grading all of the assignments. And midterms. And finals. The professors I worked for always encouraged the TAs to give our e-mail addresses to students and to collect the students' e-mail addresses. This was presumably for ease of communication. If class was cancelled, we could just e-mail all of the students at once. If details of the assignments or tests were changed, we could announce it to everyone simultaneously. Initially I thought this was an efficient and clever way to handle sometimes difficult communication between the professor, the TA, and the student. I was wrong.

E-mail between myself and these students over four semesters has degraded into a situation where boundaries are blurred and "on the job" availability is ignored. Furthermore, the anonymity that comes from e-mail (as opposed to standing in front of someone), when combined with a student's sense of entitlement, has generated some very bold requests and complaints.

My first disillusionment with e-mail began when I collected students' addresses. I received the normal number of university-given account names that were uniform in using the student's name or initials. Then I got some e-mail names that were more creative. Then I got e-mail names that shocked me. I'm 31, and pretty open minded, but my jaw dropped when I realized students were using e-mail names that could not be considered professionally appropriate. I got addresses such as *foxxylady*, *sexykitay*, and *sweet69*. Initially I thought these were SPAM e-mails from hotmail, unsolicited advertisements for products that were, well, booming on the Internet. But no, these weren't offers for surgical enhancement. These were e-mails from young girls, all of whom looked like they were about 16 years old, and who appeared shy and deferential when asking questions in class. They looked so sweet and innocent; I wondered how they could have come up with these e-mail names and why they were using them with their TA. My friends gently explained that youth and innocence were often mutually exclusive and that this was evidence that I was getting older.

So, I set up my group listings and dived in. Then the requests came. Can I e-mail my homework? Can my doctor e-mail you regarding my absence? Can I ask questions by e-mail instead of coming to your office hours? Often, this e-mail correspondence was surprisingly informal, ignoring the format and deferential language of a formalized letter. It was, instead, a stream of consciousness, with no greeting, no capitalization, and no "signature." Imagine the written transcript of a phone conversation between teenagers. Often, it was difficult to determine if there was an actual question being asked. It was a disgorgement of protestations, anxieties, or statements of confusion and leading questions that were often incoherent. If you think freshman English essays are tough to organize, you can imagine what

these e-mails were like. I found myself beginning my replies by asking, "I'm not sure exactly what you want to know . . ."

At the encouragement of a professor, I did accept homework by e-mail and quickly encountered problems. Often, attachments came through completely unintelligible because they were not saved in the same format that my computer used to open them. Was it therefore late because I couldn't read it? When I printed the assignment out on my home computer in order to grade and return it, was that an appropriate boundary of school and work? I decided it wasn't, and asked students to print the assignment out themselves. This involved tracking people down only to hear, "I'll bring it to class next week."

With two classes of 30 students each semester, it was becoming more and more difficult to keep up. Students sent in homework by e-mail but didn't come to class. Should I give them full credit? Students came to class and then sent in homework by e-mail, arguing that their homework wasn't late because they'd sent it before class; I just hadn't checked my e-mail until afterwards. This didn't seem right either.

I soon became familiar with e-mails at 10 p.m. the night before the midterm. Every time I checked my personal e-mail, I'd receive a last-minute request or question. Not from all 60 students, but from a few, each day. The first semester, I was an enthusiastic and eager TA and answered them religiously. Later, I realized I was working while at home and that I needed to draw the line. Then students would ask me to give them their midterm or final grade by e-mail. "You see, I can't come to class to get the grade because I'm going to be out of town to attend my neighbor's/cousin's/sister's confirmation and I must leave campus early." It is only when I suggested that they come to my office hours to pick up their midterm and grade (so we could talk face to face) that the e-mails stopped.

Finally, I received requests for grades after the final was taken. My first semester as a TA, I actually e-mailed all of my students their grades from the final exam so they would have the feedback before they got their grades in the mail. I remembered what it was like to desperately want to know what my GPA would look like, so I thought I'd be nice and send the grades out. Then I realized I'd spent a good two hours during my Christmas break sending these e-mails. I resolved to draw the line next time. This past semester, when students would ask me to e-mail them their final exam grades as soon as they were determined, I hedged, "I'll be out of town and unable to access e-mail." Nonetheless, the requests came (surprise) by e-mail days and weeks after the final exam. Some students sent more than one request. I began to answer them. "I am away from the office, and the finals are packed in boxes for the department's move. Therefore, I can't tell you what you got on the final, but you'll get your grades in the mail soon. I enjoyed having you in the class and I hope you have a good semester." No reply.

I knew immediately when students received their grades in the mail because I began to receive e-mails with disgruntled queries: "Why did I get a B+ instead of an A?" some students demanded. I was shocked, not only because the wording of their e-mails was bold, angry, and confrontational (displaying a way of talking to a teacher that I would have never dreamed of, and remember, I'm only 31!), but these e-mails were coming at the end of June, a full month after school was over and my duties as a TA were finished. By July, I had become familiar with the "Block Sender" option in my e-mail account.

I return to graduate school this term with a resolve to learn from my mistakes. I will create a new e-mail address for use only with students. This way, when I check my own personal e-mail, I will not receive demands and requests from students when I'm "off-duty." I also resolve to only check this designated e-mail account while I am on campus, preferably during my office hours. Otherwise, I am using my own computer on my own time to work. Sure, it's a minute or two per e-mail, but those minutes add up. And if a message contains a student complaint, I find myself sitting in my pajamas before my day has even started, getting all worked up about the request/complaint/question. Additionally, I plan to stop checking this new account the day of the final. Once the business of the semester is finished, I will no longer allow myself to be, frankly, harassed by unhappy students on into the Christmas or summer holiday.

I have also decided not to accept homework by e-mail. This is tricky because the professor I work for might actually encourage the practice. This is but one of the boundary issues inherent in the difficult professor/TA/undergrad triangle. I do not decide what to teach, yet I must grade assignments based on readings without always knowing what the professor wants the students to get out of the reading. While the professors make the rules and grading policies, TAs are left to enforce them with students who do not have as much respect for a TA as they do for a professor. My authority over students is already challenged because I look young, am female, and don't have an advanced degree.

Finally, I will encourage students not to use e-mail as a substitute for coming to my office hours. It's hard to convince students that it is worth the trouble to figure out where the department is located in order to speak with me face to face, but it is a valuable service. My happiest memories of college were those meetings spent in my professors' offices, babbling on about my questions about the class and actually getting to know the professor in the process. Plus, the professor got to know me, to see that I cared about the class and wanted to understand what was going on, beyond what my grade would be.

E-mail isn't all bad, I must admit. There was one instance when, after a particularly difficult class session, a shy and quiet boy sent me an e-mail. Oh God, I thought. What is it this time? Instead of a complaint, this e-mail was a note of

encouragement, praising me for “hanging in there” with the more challenging students and telling me how much he enjoyed the class. I am sure he was too shy to say this to my face, and letting me know by e-mail was the only way he could do it. It made my day, even my week, because as teachers know, notes like that are rare and precious. I’m hopeful that my new resolutions will allow me to keep the boundaries clear, and keep the negative aspects out, while still allowing the positive aspects of teaching to filter in.

Amy Albert is a doctoral candidate in History at the University of Connecticut, where she has worked as a Teaching Assistant since 1999.

Overcoming Barriers: Part-time Writing Faculty Contributions at Madison Area Technical College

Nancy McMahon, Bill Detra, Larry Hansen, and Gail Shearer

Part-time writing faculty at Madison Area Technical College in Madison, Wisconsin, are working as individuals and as a union along with administrators to improve the quality of instruction by overcoming the barriers common to part-time faculty. Madison Area Technical College (MATC) is a technical and community college serving about 50,000 full- and part-time students in all or parts of twelve counties at more than seven locations in south-central Wisconsin. With about 400 full-time faculty, MATC also employs up to 1800 part-time faculty. MATC has about 23 full-time English faculty with about the same number of part-time English teachers. As many as half of the part-time English faculty is new each fall. (Only a small portion of the part-time faculty have taught more than three years at MATC. Turnover is about 1/3 each year.) Some of these teachers have previous teaching experience; many do not have any experience teaching at this level. Implementing better communication, adapting teaching methods to current technology, increasing knowledge of curriculum across the institution, and using the part-time faculty union to provide a voice in institutional issues all help part-time faculty to better serve students.

Tip Sheet: A “best practices” example of MATC’s administration improving communication for part-time writing faculty was achieved when Larry Hansen, a former part-time, now full-time teacher was awarded one-course release time for his project. His goal was to develop a newsletter that would support the part-time English faculty that was scattered across the school’s four campuses. In addition, he held meetings where these teachers could come to communicate and coordinate their ideas and concerns. Larry is the only full-time English teacher at these four

campuses, while all other English teachers outside of Madison are part-time, teaching up to three courses at various locations.

Part-time writing faculty especially appreciate the newsletter, *Tip Sheet*, because it has information about what's going on in other sections of the same classes they are teaching, Web information, interviews with part-time teachers about how they use local resources in their classes, and institutional information. The *Tip Sheet* is published twice a year. Watertown (Larry's home campus) support staff send it to regional part-time English teachers while the Truax (main Madison campus) support staff send it to the Truax and Downtown part-time English teachers. Hansen uses e-mail extensively to correspond with his part-timers about myriad issues from school policies to grading criteria to grade controversies. MATC has both an English department listserv and a part-time English faculty listserv of sorts. The Arts and Sciences Division holds a new part-time teacher orientation session each semester, has developed a handbook for part-time faculty, and attempts some professional inclusion by paying for a few hours of inservice and meeting time.

Online Instruction: One of MATC's part-time English composition instructors, Bill Detra, teaches totally online for the college while living in Sarasota, Florida. (He has a backup person in Madison who can conduct an initial meeting with students to cover techniques necessary for the course management software.) Bill says it is vital to refine the composition curriculum so it is easy to understand online. This may seem obvious, but teaching online is very different from traditional face-to-face teaching. Students really need more connection with the instructor, and since there is, for the most part, just text on a computer screen, that text needs crystal clarity. This need for clear writing sharpens an instructor's composition skills and, according to Bill, results in better overall instructors who focus on the student's point of view. True online teaching takes more instructor time than traditional approaches, and pay amounts to about \$7.50 an hour when counting all the time needed (MATC pays \$31.59 an hour for classroom hours only). E-mail or faxes are used if there are server problems.

Course Outline Study: Gail Shearer, a pre-General Education Division writing teacher, has examined the MATC cross-institutional connections (or lack thereof) with the two-year program and college transfer writing/English classes. The college is putting all course outlines on the Web, giving accessibility to new part-time faculty who previously often weren't informed about the overall curriculum. <http://www.madison.tec.wi.us/is/iss/etla/curriculum/Arts&Science/arts&sciences.htm> posts the course outlines. Not all course outlines have been completed for the Web, but they will be available soon.

Organizing: Nancy McMahon, a more than 20-year veteran of teaching English composition, helped Madison Area Technical College part-time faculty unionize in 1996. Organization is key for having a voice in an institution, a contract, a newsletter, a listserv, and professional inclusion. The process has been slow and frustrating, but there is improvement where there was none for decades. Professional inclusion of part-time faculty has improved. Hourly pay has increased from \$22.50 an hour (face time only) to \$31.59 since 1996. Holidays, sick leave, and snow days are now paid time. English/writing teachers are the most overworked and underpaid of the whole bargaining unit (no news to any part-time writing teachers anywhere), and MATC is trying to implement a few things like voicemail. Most needed, of course, are offices, more money, and better benefits. McMahon urges part-time teachers to examine their state laws to see if there are other ways to improve their lot, just as she did with a Wisconsin Retirement System appeal. After her successful inclusion, the union is helping other part-time faculty members gain inclusion in the retirement system, a right by state statute for all part-time faculty teaching over 1/3 of a full-time position for a year. The Madison Area Technical College Part-Time Faculty Union also has formed a political action committee, urging part-time faculty to work with their students, boards, legislatures, etc. to promote equal pay for equal work.

With extensive nationwide use of part-time writing teachers, institutions need to recognize the professional status of their part-time faculty. Improved communication, help in adapting to online instruction, knowledge of overall curriculum, and organized representation can help to overcome barriers often experienced by part-time teachers.

About the Wisconsin System: Wisconsin has a state technical school system of 16 districts for two-year colleges providing both technical and community college education. Districts each negotiate their own contracts; however, there is a statewide Wisconsin Technical College System Council of union representatives who meet regularly to discuss contracts, issues, and political strategy. Teachers in Wisconsin cannot strike but must use binding arbitration in contract disputes. Arbitrators use contracts from similar schools as comparables when making decisions. All 16 districts have union representation for full-time faculty, but only 3 districts have part-time faculty unions. The three part-time unions have very different situations: Milwaukee has a part-time union that is connected with the full-time union, working off the same salary schedule and workload contract. Waukeesha has a newly formed wall-to-wall union now working on a contract. Madison Area Technical College Part-Time Faculty Union has a separate local from the full-time union but works closely with them. Until more part-time faculty unions are organized with decent contracts, the use of binding arbitration is a

disaster to Wisconsin part-time faculty unions. The Madison Area Technical College Part-Time Faculty Union lost in a 2000 contract arbitration because the arbitrator maintained there were no comparables in the geographic area; therefore, no possibility for a favorable ruling. Major issues were class assignment language and use of a scale awarding more pay for additional education and experience.

Nancy McMahon has taught writing classes at MATC for 25 years. She has long advocated for more student services at nontraditional times as well as for more professional treatment for part-time faculty. She can be reached at nmcmahon@ptunion.org. Bill Detra has been teaching online for the past five semesters for MATC. Larry D. Hansen, formerly part-time, is the Lead English Instructor for the regional campuses of MATC. Gail Shearer is a four-year veteran teacher of adult basic education courses through MATC.

Book Review

Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America

by John H. McWhorter, The Free Press, 2000

Reviewed by Pat Morgan, English Department, Louisiana State University

Losing the Race offers the kind of thought-provoking, controversial examination of black underachievement that is best done by an insider. John H. McWhorter has the academic credentials (Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley) and the personal experience (well-known black scholar) to earn a hearing from the most resistant of critics. McWhorter makes effective use of history, anecdote, statistics, and personal experiences to present a readable and persuasive analysis of the mindset that, he argues, makes black underachievement the norm. White audiences eager for absolution might find McWhorter's views comforting, and black audiences who might easily dismiss such interpretations from white scholars will find McWhorter's voice harder to ignore.

Although McWhorter has been a frequent guest on talk shows, he does not hold himself up as the voice of the black experience. Consider his wry take on his celebrity during the 1996 discussions of the Oakland school board resolution on Ebonics, a resolution he did not support. Noting that "expertise" was then much in demand, McWhorter attributes his popularity to the need for ". . . a black linguist to express an opposing viewpoint, and there turned out to be only one."

To begin by labeling McWhorter's book controversial, thought-provoking, discomfiting, well documented, and readable is to suggest that this article is a straightforward review of the text. However, perusing the book with the editorial instruction "to see what could be made of it" for *Forum* led this reader in another

direction. McWhorter argues that the only way to resolve a problem is by identifying it, and he takes an unflinching look at a community that he sees as its own “main obstacle” to achievement. His descriptions of the attitudes that are self-sabotaging black achievement find an uncomfortable echo in certain aspects of the non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty experience. If McWhorter’s causal analysis has merit (an issue that this reader is unprepared and unwilling to debate), might it also contain advice and warning to another community that also finds progress a struggle?

Finding differences rather than parallels is a simple task. Such differences abound and could make a case for dismissing all further attempts to connect NTT faculty and black Americans. However, suspending disbelief and indulging in honest introspection may be more productive. In all honesty, do we share some of the attitudes that McWhorter sees as self-sabotaging when a minority has long been oppressed by a majority?

To begin, McWhorter argues that the Cult of Victimology fixates its members on difficulties, nurturing abuse as part of the group identity. Belief that one’s identity is founded on victimhood argues that one cannot be a group member unless one is a victim, encouraging groups to bond by sharing horror stories. McWhorter cites instances of stories that were wildly exaggerated or entirely fabricated, yet deeply appreciated when shared. He argues that such insistent focus on victimization blurs any distinction between isolated examples and patterns of persecution.

Are NTT faculty in danger of such a fixation? We have gathered at CCCC for some years now, commiserating with fellow sufferers and cheering the triumphs of our colleagues. Unlike black Americans, we are at the beginning of a rights movement, and our stories create an awareness of the problems that must inflame and inspire us to action. Yet, if we feel compelled to dust off old stories and exaggerate them a bit, if we feel a bit removed from the “group” because our lives are not as miserable or our sufferings not as acute, should we not be warned by McWhorter to avoid a passage from shared suffering to permanent victim status? Let us not drift in that direction, but instead resolve to keep stories of abuse as motivation, not identification.

A second current in the stream of thinking McWhorter describes is the concept of Separatism, which defines black people as a unique entity to which the normal rules do not apply. Continued suffering makes black Americans exempt from the rules by which others abide. It is a method of self-protection, one that expects that blacks do not criticize each other or involve themselves in the mainstream culture. He cites presentations at black conferences that do not meet academic standards of support and accuracy, presentations that are not questioned by the audience but serve to reinforce emotional predispositions. He argues that scholarly debate and

serious questions are too often seen as offensive, as undermining a group unity that must be preserved and presented to the “other” world.

Does any of McWhorter’s warning apply to NTT discussion? Optimistically, we remain a group that honors truth and understanding over unity. But the temptation may exist to defend an instructor—always, unquestioningly, unreservedly—in any conflict with the “mainstream.” If we fail to see professorial faculty as colleagues, we accept an old definition of ourselves as “other” (read: lesser) faculty. Assuming that we belong, taking our place beside the tenured faculty, recognizing that what we do has equivalent (if not identical) value, and refusing to be defined by those who do not understand what we do are key behaviors as we seek professional recognition from our peers. Certainly we would be naïve to deny that any such hierarchy exists (just as McWhorter warns against denying the continued existence of racism), but we cannot separate ourselves from the mainstream. In McWhorter’s discussion, separatism creates an insular world whose inhabitants are not expected to live up to the standards of the mainstream. Allowing themselves tremendous latitude, those inhabitants assign value to themselves according to less stringent standards, using their self-assigned status to grant themselves exemptions and recognition that are neither comparable nor compared to the mainstream. McWhorter posits that separation avoids the issue of equality and protects members from labels but also denies them full status in the larger community. Establishing an NTT special interest group acknowledges the bonds we share with each other, but it should not define us as a separate entity; we must remain a subset of the whole and take our place alongside other faculty. We need not, we must not, be separate to be equal. We cannot settle for less, from ourselves or from our colleagues.

McWhorter’s third current is a tendency toward Anti-intellectualism, a resistance to the careful examination of issues. He argues that any interest in serious scholarship is seen as “white” behavior; the black student who explores ideas for the sake of knowledge is not a real brother. The history of oppression, he says, is used as a reasonable explanation and justification of black disinterest in anything beyond the black culture. McWhorter argues that the emphasis on black experience to the exclusion of other knowledge is more than a narrowing of one’s education and potential. He argues that the disinterest in intellectual engagement can be used as evidence to show lower intellect, and that the excuses made for black students dismiss them as incapable of better work.

Are NTT faculty anti-intellectual? If we allow ourselves to be excused from active scholarship because we are too busy and too tired, we at least open the door to such an attack. At every institution there are engaged, active scholars who share ideas through discussion groups, journal articles, and conference attendance. Are they somehow superhuman? Are they somehow less dedicated to the work of

teaching composition? Do we feel a temptation to explain, to rationalize, why “they” can be actively engaged, but we cannot? If we accept that publication is too much to ask of us because of our over-burdened schedules, how big a step is it to the conclusion that NTT faculty aren’t scholars, not because of the incredible demands of our jobs but because of the limitations of our intellectual commitment?

I offer these questions in the spirit of warning. The NTT faculty quest is a more recent one, one that is not yet in the transition stage McWhorter claims for the Civil Rights movement. Allowing for the many and crucial differences between our fight and the fight for basic human rights, we can nonetheless hold his words up as a mirror to check for distortions. Just as his descriptions of the Cult of Victimology, Separatism, and Anti-intellectualism have uncomfortable similarities to our situations, so too can his suggestions for improved mindset be relevant. Consider, then, a paraphrase of McWhorter’s three mantras, offered here as in his text as “three new habits of thinking . . . [to] help us get beyond [any] self-imposed ideological obstacle to success”:

- *Our successes are no longer “anecdotes”: they are the norm.* When NTT faculty come back to CCCC with stories of change and progress, let us see these as signs of change, as models for our own institutions rather than as “lucky” events.
- *Occasional inconvenience is not oppression.* As we see progress as the norm, we must not let the continued abuses beat us into depressed submission. There are more success stories, more gains each year. Setbacks need not be the definition of our experience.
- *When a [group] has urgent work to do, people crying “Wolf” are wasting our time.* We must resist the urge to join a pity party. There are abuses that are real and outrageous, abuses that sap the spirit and weary the step, but we must not try to trump such stories to feel that we are comrades. More unites us than our suffering.

NTT faculty members are not losing this race, and we cannot pretend, even for a moment, that we are.

Patricia Morgan, a teacher for more than 30 years, most of it at Louisiana State University, has never regretted choosing teaching writing over research.

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