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The Interference Narrative and the Real Value of Student Work

This project explores the dynamic impact of student employment on classroom discourse and on students' long-term academic and professional success. Using student surveys, institutional data, and scholarly research, I demonstrate that students' everyday workplace experiences play an integral (and potentially integrated) role in their liberal arts education and in their ability to negotiate future workplace literacies.

Our classrooms contain a rich cross-section of community life through the everyday jobs students hold. At the regional Midwestern University where I teach, students are also employed as custodians, security guards, restaurant servers, cooks, hair stylists, tanning bed operators, bridal consultants, drivers, census takers, pet groomers, ushers, DJs, airline flight trackers, foundry workers, carpenters, and stone masons. They are customer service workers at grocery stores, big box stores, clothing stores, department stores, framing stores, toy stores, tux shops, costume shops, and auto parts shops. They are bank tellers, office receptionists, administrative assistants, nursing assistants, social service caseworkers, caretakers for the elderly,

CCC 68:3 / FEBRUARY 2017

the mentally ill, and hospice patients, providers of transcription services, answering services, and Reiki treatments, and interpreters for non-English-speaking patients and customers. Some are also farmers and landscapers; some are managers of tobacco stores, gas stations, and fast-food restaurants; some own their own businesses: daycares, photography studios, technology support firms, marketing firms, and bakeries.¹ These work experiences powerfully shape the identities students are evolving before and during college and represent a potentially vital intersection between the university and the community workplaces that surround it.

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multidimensional realities of students’ actual work experiences are often rendered invisible or obscured through a narrative of interference. That narrative portrays obligatory “outside” jobs as simple deterrents, preventing some students from completing their college degrees or at least slowing them beyond the timelines dictated by state legislators. The narrative is compelling because it is partly true, especially for students from low-income families with greater “unmet need.”² It is also substantiated by some localized studies showing that higher work hours can indeed have a negative impact on student GPAs and retention and can contribute to higher levels of stress and feelings of academic estrangement (Svanum and Bigatti; Hawkins et al.).

However, other research analyzing the overall impact of student employment on academic performance complicates that indictment of work as sheer interference, including studies showing that students working significant hours per week achieve higher GPAs and have greater academic engagement than their nonworking counterparts (Dundes and Marx; Canabal).³ Broader studies based on National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data conclude that students’ working hours have little or no impact in terms of grades and time spent preparing for class once the researchers controlled for other variables such as race and sex (Lang; McCormick, Moore, and Kuh). Yet this research tends to be less known or less

intuitively compelling than the story of student jobs as the economically driven antagonists to academic achievement.

The problem with the narrative, then, is that it reduces a more complex set of possibilities to a simple but compelling storyline. In doing so, it undercuts the productive role that work can play in undergraduate education. It also tends to marginalize students who must work as an unfortunate minority implicitly opposed to a vision of “typical” college students, who are fully funded, immersed in the residential campus experience, and bound for timely degree completion. This storyline targets work as a problem while distorting the national reality showing that “typical” students do work significant hours from necessity: “almost half of all full-time undergraduates and 81% of part-time undergraduates are employed while enrolled in college”; the majority of employed students are working twenty or more hours per week, and 90 percent of them hold regular jobs off campus (Baum 3–4, 7).⁴ Further, as a 2010 compendium of research on higher education policies and practices related to working students makes clear, that view of employment as pure interference itself becomes a roadblock to institutional change: “public policymakers and institutional leaders can no longer view student employment as an ‘unnecessary, unfortunate distraction’ from undergraduate studies given the prevalence and intensity of employment” (Perna, “Conclusions” 286). Marginalizing student employment as a problem affecting the minority, then, actually impedes efforts to address the underlying economic inequalities while undermining opportunities for incorporating everyday jobs as a productive part of the undergraduate experience.

Moreover, the persuasive power of the interference narrative fosters a presumed disconnect between students’ current “dead-end” jobs and the future “careers” awaiting them after college. In *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition*, Tony Scott supplies a scathing analysis of the university’s role in sustaining that disconnect:

Most student-workers spend part of each week working in low-end jobs that can offer little agency, recognition, pay, or even stability. During the other part of the week students attend classes in institutions that offer the “bait and switch” promise of escaping these “dead-end” jobs even as they reinforce the basic cultural and economic logics that create them. In the context of higher education, the dead-end job of the present doesn’t often come into full focus as the subject of legitimate examination and critique. Students’ identities and

worker identities remain juxtaposed, but aren't often brought into critical dialectic. Work remains on the margins of curricular focus, unvalidated and unexamined, but looming nevertheless as a kind of morality play boogeyman, the impetus for betterment and the cautionary consequence of a lack of ambition and hard work. (161–62)

Scott's characterization helps to explain why university administrations are so quick to support career-focused internship programs and workplace readiness initiatives and so much less invested in including students' current jobs as an integral part of the college-track picture. It also brings to the fore an implicit discomfort many teachers may experience in their institutional roles and underscores the responsibility many feel to engage with students in a critical examination of this disconnect rather than facilitate it. Building on Scott's work, I argue further that giving that "boogeyman" full and detailed attention, both in our classrooms and in our scholarship, gives us the opportunity to reexamine the nature of those "dead end" jobs and reconsider their real value in students' lives and their function in higher education.

This article is intended first and foremost to foreground the messy, complicated realities of student work by allowing students' own descriptions to render those job experiences visible and concrete. It highlights the variety and multidimensionality of students' everyday jobs in an attempt to counteract the interference narrative's power to reduce those jobs to an undifferentiated morass of minimum wage options distracting from their academic studies. I argue that the predominance of that narrative, for many administrators, faculty, and some students themselves, undermines the productive role those work experiences can play in shaping students' professional identities while concomitantly preventing exploitative, dehumanizing jobs from becoming objects of shared scrutiny and critique. We can defuse that narrative in part by (1) looking carefully at the details it obscures, (2) by recognizing the complex ways in which some students already make sense of their jobs in relation to their academic studies, and (3) by acknowledging the "conflicts" and "dissonances" other students experience in moving between the discourses of work and school (Gee; Lu). But we can't entirely dispel it or fully address some of the institutional and socioeconomic forces that drive it. This project explores the possibilities and limits of classroom interventions to meaningfully engage with the realities of student employment and indicates some of the challenges involved in

attempting effective institutional change. In this effort, I draw on the rich body of literature in composition studies that explores many ways faculty can work through first-year writing classrooms to help students recognize and mobilize the “discursive resources” they have already gained at work, both to enhance their strategic acquisition of academic literacy and to negotiate future workplace literacies (Carter; Gee; Lu; Lu and Horner; Powell; Rose; Scott; Seitz, “Making”; Shor). However, building on the work of Tony Scott and Pegeen Reichert Powell in particular, I also stress the necessity of thinking and acting beyond the classroom. The qualitative case study of student work I portray in this essay is an effort to do just that.

Making Students’ Everyday Jobs Visible: Designing a Survey to Combat the Interference Narrative

Like many teachers serving primarily local, commuter student populations with heavy commitments to outside jobs, I have used work-based curricula over the years to encourage students to explore the intersections between school literacies and their immediate and omnipresent “vernacular literacies” outside the classroom (Carter 14).⁵ In the work experience narratives and interviews produced in my courses, students’ depictions of their everyday jobs provide a remarkable panorama of the ever-changing employment scene in this midwestern, de-industrializing rust belt city.⁶ Their analyses of work in relation to readings by Mike Rose, bell hooks, Barbara Ehrenreich, Michael Lewis, and Barbara Garson, among others, expose the gamut of work conditions in our city, from mundane or terrible to inspiring or transformative. Their work literacy narratives also reveal the dazzling array of discourse “identity kits” they have acquired through those experiences, the many “ways of acting-interacting-feeling-emoting-valuing-gesturing-posturing-dressing-thinking-believing-knowing-speaking-listening (and,

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in some Discourses, reading-and-writing, as well)” that confirm their memberships in multiple communities (Gee 40). Through those narratives

and in classroom discussions, students also reveal the conflicts involved in balancing those various discourse expectations and the tensions some face in taking on the identities and practices implicit in particular discourses. As I listened to those students over the years, it became clear that the

everyday jobs they hold while attending college have a profound impact not only on their experiences in and beyond the classroom but also on the character and culture of my institution. We derive our institutional identity in part from the jobs students hold and from the disparate working-world discourses they bring into the classroom.

Yet in my administrative roles as director of first-year writing and occasionally associate chair of the English Department, I was constantly reminded of the broader institutional invisibility of student work and the persistence of the interference narrative, despite pedagogical innovations by various faculty members in multiple disciplines. Even campus committees organized to foster internships and career opportunities seemed to ignore the potential contributions offered by students' current jobs. I decided that one way I could make the reality of those everyday jobs more visible beyond the classroom would be to take

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toward graduation. My goal was to create a more personalized picture than the one provided by our office of institutional research's charts and graphs and, as much as possible, with the details filled in directly by students themselves.⁷ For all these reasons, I conducted a survey of the entire population of students currently enrolled at my university, inviting respondents to detail the kinds of jobs they actually do, estimate the hours they log per week, and describe some typical duties and experiences on those jobs.⁸ I also asked them to give their sense of the benefits and challenges involved in balancing their work commitments with their academic studies and to assess how their jobs had contributed to or detracted from their ability to succeed in college (see the Appendix for a description of the survey questions and distribution methods and some sample findings). Rather than aiming for statistically significant data in designing the survey, I was interested in gathering a qualitatively rich portrait of these students' actual job experiences based on their own descriptions and on their subjective perceptions of the value of their work in relation to their academic goals.⁹

The design of the survey questions was strongly influenced by Mike Rose's remarkable study *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*, which had also been the linchpin of my work-based curricula. Rose points to the cultural stigma that tends to reduce "blue-collar" jobs to a set of physical skills that are compartmentalized as separate from the cognitive labor, the "knowledge work," of educated professionals and are generally accorded lower status (xvii). To push past this dichotomy and fill in the erased dimensions of everyday work, Rose builds from interviews with restaurant servers (particularly his own waitress mother), hair stylists, welders, vocational/technical teachers and student apprentice plumbers, electricians, and carpenters to demonstrate the cognitive and problem-solving aspects of manufacturing and service work. Although Rose's intimate portraits of working identities are not explicitly characterized in terms of discourse, his examination of the communal contexts of work speaks to Gee's sense of how individuals acquire, understand, and navigate among multiple discourse "identity kits." Throughout his observational studies of each kind of job, Rose uses the details of the work itself and the complex thought processes and behaviors of the individual doing the work to reconfigure our understanding of each job and to make a case for the cultural dignity and respect it deserves. While my brief survey lacked the depth of Rose's intensive interview process, I tried to frame the survey questions in the spirit of his work to elicit students' reflections on their actual job duties and experiences—aiming for a broader but still detailed depiction of our student body's working profile.¹⁰

The Multidimensionality of Student Work: Defusing the Interference Narrative

On one level, the most illuminating take-away from the survey responses is the sheer *variety* of job experiences students describe, which in itself powerfully counteracts the tendency of the interference narrative to render student work as so many interchangeable, dead-end options. Survey respondents not only report the notable range of occupations indicated in the opening of this essay, but also describe the eclectic mix of duties involved in many jobs:

- "Changing diapers feeding the children facilitating playtime reading books cleaning/sanitizing enforcing good habits (washing hands,

putting toys away) doing activities (play dough, building blocks, art projects, games).”

- “I make invoices, quotes, purchase orders, run errands, order materials, e-mail and talk to clients, clean the offices, pay taxes, pay bills, enter bills, do payroll, etc.”
- “Operating material handling equipment (forklifts etc.). Organizing associates to the workflow troubleshooting problems. Identifying trouble points in the department, and solving them. Order picking and packing.”
- “Entering data into the computer—pt information—Prescription information—taking phone calls—fielding questions for the pharmacists—helping customer finds things in the store—inventory management—ringing up customers—counting drugs and labeling bottles.”
- “Taking orders, serving food, serving beer and wine, making smoothies and juices, running credit cards and making cash transactions, cleaning, answering phones, vacuuming and sweeping, doing dishes, bussing tables, talking to customers, helping out coworkers, rolling silverware, counting money.”¹¹

As this brief sampling of individualized accounts indicates, jobs that might otherwise be slotted into established categories (child/patient care, restaurant, factory, or clerical work) and consequently screened through evaluative lenses (skilled/unskilled, dead-end/professionalized) come into clearer focus through each individual student worker’s depiction of the work itself.

The mix of skills and varying responsibilities involved in each job underscores Rose’s argument about the multidimensionality of work—physical, spatial, cognitive, social, psychological—once more reductive categories and their accompanying biases are set aside. By observing and listening to the person doing the work, Rose argues, we can see “the mental processes that enable service. The aesthetics of physical labor. The complex interplay of the social and the mechanical. The choreography of hand, eye, ear, brain. The everpresence of abstraction, planning, and problem solving in everyday work” (xvii). Even within the relatively limited purview of the survey format, many respondents convey something of this multidimensionality. For example, one student working as a groomer for a national pet supply

chain characterizes the physical, social, and cognitive aspects of the job in his or her list of job duties, which involve everything from bathing pets and giving them haircuts to “communications with clients—determining ideals, discussing realities in regards to potential hairstyles for pets. Multi-tasking. Cleaning. Answering phones.” Describing a specific experience on the job, the respondent says,

A lady brought in the family dog for a bath, nail trim and hair cut. While checking her dog in, I realized that the dog had some matting, which could potentially compromise the haircut that she wanted her dog to receive. After explaining the risks (discomfort, uneven haircut, bruising, etc.) involved with brushing out the mats, and the benefits of getting a conditioner, we came to an agreement on what haircut would be best for the dog, and for her. The dog was a bit anxious, so I spent some extra time “bonding” with her, and proceeded with the groom at a slow, calm, pace so as not to startle the dog. When we were finished, the dog looked great and walked with her tail waving proudly in the air, even coming back to me for one last nuzzle before she left. Communication, patience, and understanding on all parts resulted in a good experience for everyone.

Here we see the student worker making knowledgeable judgments about the kind of trim that would be most appropriate for the dog and taking into consideration the owner’s fantasy image of her pet, while responding through physical touch to the pooch’s nervous state. The quality of “attention” is most notable here. Rose defines *attention* as a “selective focus” that allows for “mindfulness” of details within a larger awareness of “big picture” goals and with “a concentration as well as a vigilance for similar anticipated events or objects” (14–15). The student’s skill in achieving precisely that micro/macro balance of attention and the pride he or she conveys in those problem-solving abilities suggest an awareness and ownership of this particular “identity kit” that goes far beyond what we might imagine happening in a corporatized chain-store environment.

The student’s ability to translate that “selective focus” between the discourses of work and school becomes evident in subsequent responses, where he or she notes the “stress and exhaustion” of managing an unpredictable schedule but continues to emphasize the cognitive and psychological benefits of combining the two: “I am learning how to be more flexible and imaginative in my thinking. [...] By being able to see and apply things that I learn in my classes to my daily life I am more empowered and confident and

can apply that back to school.” Another respondent working “outrageously unpredictable” hours for a carpet-cleaning company characterizes a similar benefit in social and psychological terms:

I feel the biggest problem [juggling work and school was] that not having a reliable schedule results in a sporadic homework regimen. However dealing with customers on a daily basis helps me to stay socially active and connected with people. Also being trusted with expensive equipment as well as being trusted in empty homes is a boost to my self esteem making me feel as though I'm a trustworthy individual. Plus having gotten as far as I have with the company shows I can apply myself to anything I set my mind to which is quite the confidence boost.

In this description of work that others might perceive as mindless or back breaking, the respondent deftly transforms the experience into the basis for social connection and improved self-esteem. As both these examples suggest, students can be profoundly aware of productive intersections between the professional identities they are evolving at work and at school and creative in forging those intersections. Often, it is academic institutions or local employers who are more shortsighted about those inherent connections.

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Another notable factor that emerges in the survey responses is the *combined* experiences accumulated by individuals doing several jobs consecutively or all at once. For example, one respondent proudly reels off the mix of jobs he or she has held while remaining a successful full-time student, including working as a fuel dispatcher for an oil company, running YMCA sports programs and volunteer coaching, being a receptionist for a local business, and doing police field work. The respondent notes the loss of sleep involved in keeping up this frenetic schedule but concludes, “working so many hours taught me responsibility and personal restraints and tactics. It helps to be mature in college.” Another respondent, working in an ice-cream-focused chain restaurant while running an eBay business from home, also makes money as a card dealer and poker player and works

as a math tutor at Midwestern University. This respondent's list of typical job experiences notes, in particular, "thinking deeply on a high level for both math tutoring and playing poker." Yet another respondent works as an administrative assistant (doing "accounts payable/receivable, invoice management, process mail, general cleaning duties such as vacuuming, dusting, watering plants") while moonlighting as a lifeguard, swim coach, and pool manager ("create shift schedules, hire/fire/manage employees, plan family events such as luau parties with a DJ and food, place orders for supplies"). The composite created by the 412 survey respondents illuminates a rich portrait of complex lives and intersecting communities. Those intersections compound individual identity development and, through our students, infuse the university with a particular character and significance that is both distinctly regional and intricately intertwined with global networks and affiliations.

The Opportunities and Limits of Pedagogical Interventions

First-year writing classrooms are frequently envisioned as the key site for highlighting those intersections and for enabling students to turn their complex experiences outside the academy to their academic and professional advantage. For example, in *The Way Literacy Lives: Rhetorical Dexterity and Basic Writing Instruction*, Shannon Carter proposes a "pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity" designed for basic writing courses, which works from the array of "vernacular literacies" students have already acquired (in their jobs and in other aspects of their lives) to help them "effectively read, understand, manipulate, and negotiate the cultural and linguistic codes of a new community of practice" such as the one they might encounter in the basic writing classroom or in a future workplace setting (14). Carter builds explicitly from Gee and from Rose in emphasizing "situated" learning in the context of specific literacy practices and identifies a crucial role for first-year writing in helping students develop a strategic, "meta-cognitive" awareness of how literacies are enacted, reshaped, and redefined within familiar "communities of practice" as a method for negotiating between and within less familiar ones (67–68, 142). Overall, Carter's work makes a compelling case for the efficacy of first-year writing pedagogy to reconfigure the seeming boundaries of the classroom as an institutional space by incorporating the complex variousness of students' lives beyond the classroom.

Min-Zhan Lu makes a related case for the window of opportunity made available in first-year writing courses to help students gain an “*understanding* of [their] discursive resources,” the “interpretive process[es]” they employ in parlaying those resources, and the “dissonances” they inhabit as they move between multiple discourse community expectations and assumptions, in order to negotiate and intervene in workplace literacies of the future (35–36). Lu places greater emphasis on the potential function of first-year writing to help students use those “dissonances” as a way to achieve critical engagement, to read “against the grain” of the “value (loaded) blueprints” inherent in discourse community practices (38). Yet despite differences in terminology and emphasis, these two scholar/teachers share a compelling belief in the efficacy of first-year writing classes to help students gain a conscious awareness of the multiple discursive practices and “identity kits” they already own and to parlay that awareness into deliberative, strategic forays into less familiar discursive situations. This kind of scholarship legitimates and enables the pedagogical practices that might help faculty and students learn from discussions of work experiences whether or not the class involves specifically work-related curricula.

Yet in using available pedagogical means to highlight and encourage discourse mobility, as James Paul Gee, Glynda Hull, and Colin Lankshear see it, teachers also run the risk of programming students to become “dupes of the new capitalism,” because that very discourse mobility makes them prized commodities, “smart mobs” perfectly designed for “the new work order” (23, 58–59). Where “old” capitalism (the Fordist model of mass production based on standardization) exploited the worker for his or her labor with no regard to individual identity, they argue, “fast capitalism,” which needs to produce precisely customized goods in highly competitive niche markets, is more insidious and wide ranging, not only in its global reach but also in its insistence on incorporating the whole identity of individual workers within a corporate mindset, a refined “colonization of the lifeworld” against which our students must be even more complexly forearmed (26, 87–88). Lu and Bruce Horner point out the ways in which these overlapping “economic regimes of *fordist* and *fast* capitalism” compound the stakes of the long-standing debate in composition studies between critical and pragmatic/instrumentalist pedagogies and complicate the much-discussed “impasse” faced by teachers caught between preparing students to succeed in an unjust social and economic order or teaching them to challenge and

transform that order (113–14).¹² Not surprisingly, Horner and Lu argue that composition teachers must seek ways to do both, through “pedagogies that engage teachers and students in composing career mobility and security with and against the grain of both regimes” in part by interrogating the key terms—“such as *career*, *mobility*, and *marketable skills*—that comprise the promised outcomes of college degrees (114, 124). For them, the role of the classroom is even more crucial given a fluctuating socioeconomic landscape in which not only workplace literacies but also the essential terms through which students understand and negotiate their professional lives are in flux.

Following Lu and Horner’s injunction by drawing on students’ everyday work literacies to engage them with and against the grain of fast capitalism’s fluctuating forces seems like a tall order for first-year writing. Yet the student survey responses provide contextual support for precisely those kinds of pedagogical interventions by showing the successful, multivalent ways in which many students *already* repurpose the “discursive resources” gained through everyday jobs toward their own academic, professional, and personal goals. Given such evidence, the ethics involved in foregrounding and fostering those propensities in first-year writing classrooms seem less fraught. For example, a recent graduate who worked full-time as a dental hygienist, waitress, and sales associate while completing his or her degree says:

I was extremely busy, but I enjoyed everywhere I worked. I like meeting new people. I got to see what it would be like working at different jobs. It was hard getting things done. I would stay up late, but other than that I had good time management. [. . .] Being so busy with work made me make time for school. I still maintained all A’s being a student full time with having three jobs at one point. It was great!

Although this student does not explicitly identify the ability to transition between multiple work and school contexts in terms of discourse mobility, one can imagine the “rhetorical dexterity,” as Carter terms it, that he or she finessed in moving among three workplace identity kits and that of a successful student. This discourse mobility likely involved communicating with patients, customers, fellow students, and teachers, including using the precise slang of restaurant service and the technical terminology required of a hygienist, not to mention mastering the “dressing-talking-believing-knowing-speaking-listening” behaviors, as Gee would describe them, that would be expected in each setting.

Another respondent pinpoints even more specifically the academic benefits derived from his or her experiences working as an intern for a software developer while volunteering as a middle school teacher's assistant:

Recently, I worked with my supervisor over Skype and thoroughly tested the application I am developing. We usually spend a few hours together testing and fixing bugs (this a normal part of the development process). During my recent session with him, we tweaked the look and feel of the app and got it ready to present next week. It involves walking through various features of the app, looking over source code and making changes where necessary. [...] The internship definitely contributes to a large part of my success in my core courses. The internship is closely related to my major, which is computer science, so the skills I learn on the job enhance my ability to understand the material in the classroom. This experience has taught me the value of independent research. I have tried to apply this reasoning to general courses I am weak in and it has helped my grades tremendously.

Believe it or not, standing up in front of a bunch of middle school students has helped me get over my anxiety of public speaking.

Here, we can see how the student transfers the particular skills but also a mode of reasoning combined with greater ease in public speaking to enhance his or her academic performance. In fact, the ability to articulate and transfer those "discursive resources" from one context to another, as Gee, Hull, and Lankshear see it, will likely be more valuable in "fast capitalism's" future marketplace than the specific code-tweaking skills involved in constructing the app. It's not hard to imagine a student such as this making use of the classroom both to hone those professionalized transfers between identity kits and to gain a seasoned wariness toward the "colonization of the lifeworld" that may likely come along with job offers from Google, Amazon, and Apple.¹³

Survey responses that report adverse workplace experiences, ranging from merely disheartening to dehumanizing and exploitative, also suggest some levels at which classroom interventions might feasibly guide students to understand and make use of dissonant identity kits to parse the terms of their academic and professional goals. In some cases, students might experience relief in finding avenues within classroom discussion for identifying the workplace conditions causing them distress, for analyzing the larger historical, social, and economic forces at work in creating and maintaining those conditions, and for articulating the "dissonances" that

make the “valuing,” “thinking,” and “believing” parts of the kit required in a particular workplace environment harmful to the student’s own sense of self and self-worth. These include the student respondent working as a cashier at a membership-based big box retail store whose job depends on signing up customers for the company credit card, “even though I do not believe in credit cards and I think it’s wrong. But, you’ll be fired if you don’t ask [...] It’s dumb.” They include the student working as a machinist, who sums up his or her workplace conditions with the phrase “Ignorance, noise, and Republicanism” and depicts an environment involving coworkers telling racist jokes that the student is expected to find funny and a boss who promotes Tea Party politics and “discourages opposition, free thought, or any talk of social justice.” They include the student with Barbara Ehrenreich-esque experiences of relentless monotony and grating corporate constraints working at three different hypermarket chains who says, “I feel like my work in retail positions has lowered my confidence in finding a professional career. It was probably one of the biggest mistakes I have ever made. They beat you down and make you feel worthless while school is trying to build you up and make you realize that you can do anything you put your mind to. Worst. Decision. Ever.” In these and other similar responses, the space for reflection provided by college already appears to function as a counterbalance if not a corrective to negative workplace experiences and as an opportunity to assert an intellectual identity that is deliberately antithetical to the dissonant identity kits those students must inhabit in the workplace. In such cases, the classroom might provide a useful space to explore the ideological “blueprints” through which negative job experiences are internalized as “mistakes” or “bad decisions” on the individual’s part, rather than the result of larger socioeconomic forces and the reality of available regional job opportunities.

By learning to read and work “against the grain” of those “value (loaded) blueprints,” each of these students might ultimately have some impact on redesigning, even transforming workplace discourses in this imagined futurity (Lu 38). As Lu puts it, “Composition might very well be the only institutional space where the majority of college students might use their tuition dollars to buy some legitimate time to think, reflect on, and revise the tacit goals, values, and understanding prescribed by the discourse of flexible accumulation” (44). In this sense, envisioning the first-year-writing classroom as the site of heightened consciousness and armed intercession

becomes not just a prime opportunity but also a “responsibility,” even an imperative (Lu 44). Like Lu and many liberal arts faculty members, I experience the classroom as one of the few remaining spaces where faculty and students can make mutually transformative use of that time. Using that space to complicate and defuse the interference narrative seems well worth the pedagogical investment.

However, such classroom interventions also run the risk of pitting the ideological “blueprints” of academia against those of the workplace—in effect reinscribing the interference narrative and reinforcing students’ alienation and isolation on one side of a persistent either/or divide. First-year writing classrooms may also be ill-equipped to address the concrete circumstances that lend that narrative substance. For example, all three of the respondents quoted above also articulate the damaging impact of working long hours on their grades and overall academic success. Another respondent, working in a crane composite factory by night and at a community justice center by day, emphatically describes the clear exploitation involved in his or her factory work:

WE ARE WORKING 12 HOUR SHIFTS FROM 5pm–5am. THEY GIVE US TWO LUNCHES AND ATTEMPT FROM TIME TO TIME TO GIVE US BREAKS IN BETWEEN. WE DO FIBERGLASS FOR ALL THAT TIME. WEAR MASKS AND GLASSES AND COVER OUR CLOTHES. WE SWEAT LIKE CRAZY AND THIRST IS NO QUESTION. WE WORK STRAIGHT THE WHOLE TIME. THERE IS A LINE THAT KEEPS RUNNING AND WE HAVE TO WORK ALONG WITH IT. WE ARE HISPANIC.

Particularly based on the awareness of racist injustice conveyed in the final sentence, one can imagine a point at which the identity kit gained at the community justice center might prepare this student to expose the prevailing conditions at his or her factory job and work with others to transform them. It’s possible that the support of a classroom context of readings on social justice and worker advocacy might spur that move. But for now, the student must choose between a job that poses a health risk, let alone violating his or her sense of identity and self-worth, and the financial fallout of quitting (which this respondent was eventually able to do). In this sense, the larger composite of survey responses also dramatizes the limits of working through the classroom to address the fundamental institutional and societal shortfalls that corner students into continuing in dangerous

and dehumanizing jobs, even when they fully comprehend the destructive impact of those experiences on their immediate and long-term goals.

The full picture of student work at my institution includes students who seem stuck in similarly destructive workplace conditions with even less sense of choice or decision-making options than the respondents quoted above. For example, a student working in a daycare, providing nanny and babysitting services, and cleaning factories to make up a living wage

“I have no time, and lots of stress, even with all of my jobs I am still constantly struggling to pay my bills and contemplating bankruptcy because of the debt I am already in ... but I have to do well in school if I want to be able to someday not be struggling like this, and the result is me being completely worn down and mad at the world.”

describes in detail the “diarrhea explosions” he or she cleans off “well over 20 toilets per work day” using “strong chemical toilet cleaner that causes it to be difficult to breathe without inhaling burning fumes.” In response to the question about balancing work and school, this

respondent describes a catch-22 of anxiety and economic pressure impacting the very academic goals she or he is trying to achieve:

I have no time, and lots of stress, even with all of my jobs I am still constantly struggling to pay my bills and contemplating bankruptcy because of the debt I am already in not including the thousands in student loans, I deal with anxiety attacks and depression, work often causes me to miss school or not have time to complete schoolwork but I can't lose any of my jobs because I am already struggling with money enough as it is, but I have to do well in school if I want to be able to someday not be struggling like this, and the result is me being completely worn down and mad at the world.

Based on classroom interactions with students who are similarly “mad at the world” to the point where they have difficulty focusing on the task at hand, it is not hard to imagine how this debilitating cycle of anxiety and economic hardship would exacerbate feelings of isolation and alienation from the entire academic project. Another respondent working at a fast-food burger chain points out:

I feel like having a job as a college student detracts from my ability to succeed in college because I can't always focus all my energy on school. And the feeling I often get is “I wish I could quit but I can't because this is my gas money, this is my car insurance and my rent etc.” This also makes me feel inclined

to put work before school because of the weight work has on my ability to take care of myself.

As these examples suggest, for some students the grueling necessity of work, and the sense of futility heightened by the stress of juggling work and school, are in effect disenfranchising them from a desired future—it is the interference narrative enacted in their immediate realities. The full picture of student work includes these students confronting these real obstacles of rising tuition costs, skyrocketing debt, longer working hours, less sleep, a foreclosed sense of choice, and a failing belief in possibilities for the future.¹⁴ In these cases, it seems beyond the purview of first-year writing to factor the inherent costs of inhabiting these “dissonant” identity kits as way stations on the road to a better life and fatuous to imagine that a classroom discussion of labor conditions will begin to address them.

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Thinking beyond the Classroom

At this despairing juncture, the historical and institutional long view supplied by such scholars as Tony Scott and Pegeen Reichert Powell provides some useful ways to think about how we intervene best as teachers and scholars, in the classroom and beyond it, and some reminders about the limits of those interventions. In his own writing classrooms, Scott incorporates a work-based curriculum to generate critical dialectic, examining the disconnects between students’ academic and “worker identities” in relation to the material conditions that shape them and with an awareness of the broader social, political, and economic discourses that inform them (163). However, he makes the impassioned case throughout his book that the classroom provides only one level of engagement: effective changes in the fundamental disjunction between the corporatized mission of higher education and students’ actual lives must extend that critical dialectic to in-

clude reconsiderations at scholarly and administrative levels of employment practices. In particular, Scott points to the problem of writing programs' "neoliberal managerial practices" combined with the exploitation of part-time faculty labor and to the role of the textbook industry in facilitating that exploitation and in setting the agenda for writing instruction, among the many institutional practices and economic systems that contribute to that disjunction (56–59, 66–70).

Like many of the scholars engaging in this analysis, Scott seems more at peace with the avenues for change he is able to develop at the curricular level and more pessimistic about the potential for effecting institutional reforms.¹⁵ Pegeen Reichert Powell arrives at a similar recognition that a radical reenvisioning of the institution must involve challenging many of its core assumptions and practices. In *Retention and Resistance: Writing Instruction and Students Who Leave*, Powell points out the skewing effects of the retention movement over the past ten years in propelling a profit- and numbers-based discourse that overrides all the complexities of socioeconomic shifts, jobs, health, and family life that factor into students' academic trajectories. In keeping with Scott's work, Powell highlights the ways in which this discourse serves the corporate interests of the university and keeps well-intentioned faculty on board believing in the value and efficacy of "retention" initiatives (74–77). She argues further that by obscuring the personal and socioeconomic realities of students' lives and reducing their individual college trajectories to a numbers game, retention rhetoric tends to prevent such initiatives from achieving any significant results (99). Powell also teases out how deeply the discourse of retention has relied on the assumption of a "traditional narrative of a college education":

[In that traditional narrative] the incredible financial investment of four years of college tuition makes sense because the return on the investment is almost certain, and failure is obviously 'in the man' who, for whatever reason, doesn't play the role laid out for the protagonist. A different narrative, though, would accommodate plot twists that don't necessarily make sense, conflicts that aren't resolved, characters motivated by unpredictable and sometimes contradictory goals, protagonists who don't complete the story but are not considered tragic. (Powell 99–100)

Powell provides some of those "plot twists" through individual student case histories that help demonstrate the intermittent but still valuable

and transformative role that a college education can play for students who leave and, more importantly, the hubris of imagining that all those layers of complexity could be eradicated to fit the perfect four-year plot.

In this sense, we can see the interference narrative as the flip side of the four-year success story propelled by the retention movement. Comparatively speaking, the interference narrative provides a kindly out for the individualized failure and blame that Powell describes, by displacing the failure from the student onto a conglomerate of obstacles that the student is helpless to address. However, it depends no less on an underlying certainty that the correct story is the four-year success story. Short of achieving a “radically inclusive” reconstruction of higher education and its socioeconomic underpinnings, Powell seeks out a pedagogical solution with institutional and scholarly implications (99). Her proposed pedagogy is based on the rhetorical concept of immediate possibility (*kairos*), on seizing the moment of the classroom and making the most of its “porous” intersection with students’ current lives rather than feeding into the narratives, assumptions, and timelines set by institutions: “We don’t begin where students are in order to lead them toward subsequent semesters in the academy; we begin where students are in order to demonstrate to them the role writing can play in their lives right now; the habits and practices that can, immediately and in the future, infuse their lives as students but also as workers and citizens” (118–19). At the same time, by tackling the behemoth of the retention movement in this book, Powell is, in effect, making space in composition studies scholarship for more “kairotic” reconsiderations of curricular and institutional goals once that constraining narrative ceases to be the dominant framework. Given the larger picture of student work at my institution, Powell’s “kairotic” approach makes sense both pedagogically and as a scholarly method. Rather than focusing on the moving target of “workplace readiness” in the classroom, it makes sense to engage the intersections with students’ current workplace experiences and communities as they occur. In addition, by stepping outside the classroom to capture this institutional snapshot, I am enlisting that same spirit of *kairos* to convey at least a partial sense of the immediacy and complexity of student work “right now” and the various communities and constituencies intersecting that work. Both within and beyond the classroom, this sense of “kairotic” urgency is useful in resisting the narratives provided for us as teachers and scholars.

The Implications of This Snapshot

This snapshot of student work captures only a brief image composed in the particular historical moment of May 2013 in a particular midwestern town by a few hundred individuals who chose to respond to a campus survey. It is composed and foreshortened by all the particularities of that historical moment, including the low employment rates and economic austerity following the 2008 financial crisis, the steadily rising costs of education and of student loan debt, the low minimum wage (which likely contributed to those lively accounts from students working multiple jobs quoted above), and by the ongoing economic realities and inequalities faced by a student population with an average family income under \$36,000.¹⁶ The snapshot is colored by the demographics of that particular student body—79 percent white, 60 percent female, with a median age of twenty-one, and a commuting range largely (94 percent) limited to the two counties in which the university is housed—and by the self-selected subset of that population who responded to the survey (*Factbook* 12–13). In this sense, it remains fragmentary and inconclusive—an indicator of the perceptions and experiences of those individuals in that moment as filtered through the lenses supplied by the survey instrument itself and by my analysis of those responses.

Yet the unregenerate particularity of those raw responses adds a vital and indigestible sliver of complexity to the broader picture of student employment. That complexity is useful in combating the totalizing power of the interference narrative by exposing some of the actual student experiences obscured by that narrative and by demonstrating the resistance of those individual stories to a simple value. On one hand, those student experiences become a tempering reminder of the partial and contingent role university faculty in college classrooms play in the larger trajectory of individual students' lives. Yet the ability of many students to forge productive intersections between the identity kits gleaned in minimum wage jobs and the goals they have set for themselves in college underscores the value of continuing our efforts in the classroom and in administrative settings. For example, one student working extensive hours in a clothing store concludes, “[My work has] allowed me to better interact with others to see all aspects of any situation and see different views of others. Especially with what I would like to do. I’m majoring in Criminal Justice and working retail. I get to know others and see their views with different topics. College has helped me open my eyes and have an open mind.” The lessons of

multiperspectival awareness and tolerance that students such as this one decide to carry over from work to school and from school to work can only enrich both communities. These and many other responses seem to offer multiple, “kairotic” opportunities for collaboration with students as they negotiate and imaginatively transform their disparate experiences of work and school and as they allow us to be part of that process.

Finally, this fragmentary snapshot hints at the more complex national picture we might assemble by making students’ work experience across regions, across public and private institutions, across race, class, and gender demographics, and across economic divisions more visible.

By engaging in persistent and open-ended conversations about students’ everyday jobs in our classrooms but also administratively, institution-wide, and as a professional field, we might, at the very least, have some impact on the campus culture related

By engaging in persistent and open-ended conversations about students’ everyday jobs in our classrooms but also administratively, institution-wide, and as a professional field, we might, at the very least, have some impact on the campus culture related to student employment.

to student employment.¹⁷ As long as the interference narrative is alive and well, many students will continue to feel estranged and isolated by their work. They will feel implicitly encouraged to leave their jobs behind when they open the doors to our campus and to leave school behind when they head to work. Reopening those conversations and keeping student voices at their center may also reveal a great deal about how deeply our institutions are shaped by the jobs students do. Those conversations may also reveal how much our stated institutional goals for “student success” or future “workplace readiness” have been marred by the erasure of work as an everyday reality.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Dylan Dryer, Gail McGuire, and Jonathan Nashel for their careful and encouraging comments on various drafts of this article and to the CCC reviewers, especially Seth Kahn, for their incisive and extremely helpful feedback on subsequent versions. Most of all, my gratitude and respect go out to all the students at my university who took the time to fill out an anonymous survey and thereby transformed my understanding of their working worlds.

Appendix: Student Survey

This survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), Study #13060. It was created in Survey Monkey and included a Study Information Sheet informing students of potential risks associated with participation. The survey was sent through my Midwestern University email to all university students in May 2013. Students' responses were collected and analyzed through Survey Monkey.

Survey Questions

1. What paid or volunteer jobs have you done outside of college course work since you began attending classes at [Midwestern University]? (If the answer is "none," just say so, skip the rest of the questions, and submit the survey.) Otherwise, please list all the jobs you recall and identify your position on each job (restaurant server, retail salesperson, plant manager, volunteer hospital aid worker, etc.).
2. Roughly how many hours per week have you been working at outside jobs or volunteer work while attending college?
40+ hours per week on average
25–40 hours per week on average
10–25 hours per week on average
1–10 hours per week on average
I have not done outside jobs or volunteer work while attending college
3. What are some typical duties associated with a recent paid or volunteer job? Specifics would be a great help here! (Feel free to make a list of typical duties rather than writing in full sentences.)
4. Please describe a recent, typical experience on the job (a few sentences detailing a typical experience would be great here).
5. In a typical week, how do you balance your job and schoolwork? What are some of the challenges and benefits of maintaining that balance?
6. In what ways do you feel your paid or volunteer employment outside of course work has contributed to or detracted from your ability to succeed in college?

Sample of Survey Response Data

The graph in Figure 1 shows the response to survey question 2 regarding the number of hours students spend in paid or volunteer jobs. The graph in Figure 2 represents a quantification of responses to survey question 6, "In what ways do you feel your paid or volunteer employment outside of course work has contributed to or detracted from your ability to succeed in college?" This question provided an opportunity for respondents to summarize their perceptions of the positive and negative impacts of their jobs on their general academic success. Student responses to this question were tagged "P (if they were primarily positive), N (if they were primarily negative), M (if they gave a mixed response including both benefits and detractions), or NA (if they answered but did not specify any impact).

Q2 Roughly how many hours per week have you been working at outside jobs or volunteer work while attending college?

Answered: 377 Skipped: 34

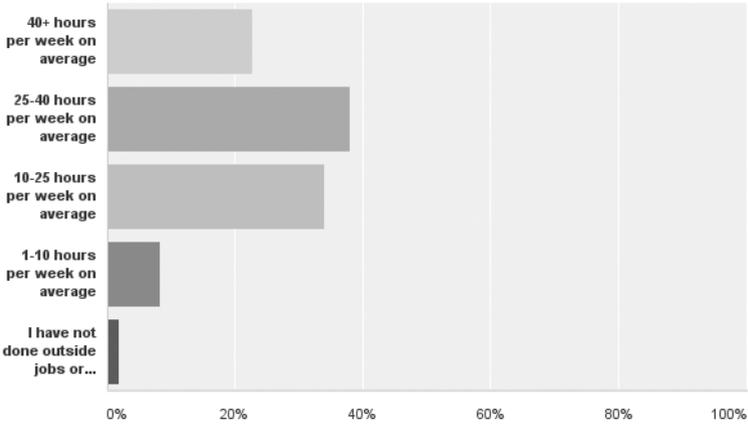


Figure 1. Survey summary chart.

Survey on Student Work

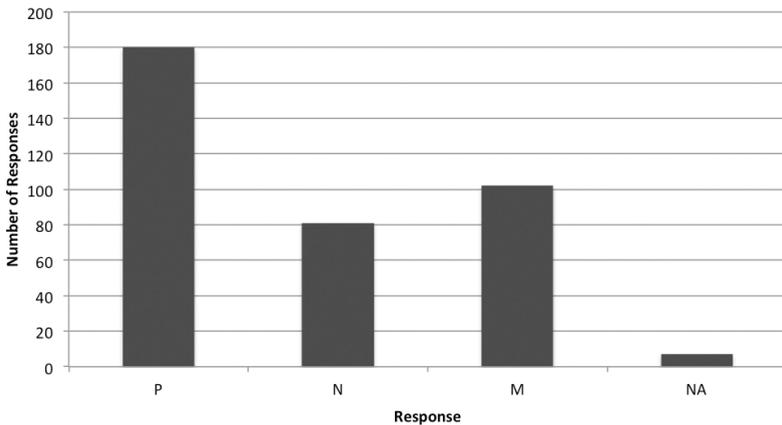


Figure 2. Survey responses to question 6.

The following are representative samples of the kinds of responses tagged for each category:

Primarily Positive

- “It has contributed in many ways. First, I have an increased dedication to my employer and to myself as an asset to my organization. I feel a very specific desire to do well and contribute more for my employer, myself, and my family than I ever had before. It’s an incredible experience being in charge of my future.”
- “I feel that this has contributed to my success because I now have more experience with working with other people. I also feel my communication skills have greatly improved because of this constant interaction with other people.”

Primarily Negative

- “The roles become intertwined and one suffers or the other. During exam time or test time work suffers. During stressful bonus review times study and class attendance (tardiness), suffers. Sleepless nights of studying increases stress anxiety and thus things you know without anxiety (on the test), become blurred or confusing until the exam or test or quiz is over when you realize all the answers you thought you marked correctly were incorrect.”
- “It has definitely slowed down my completion of this degree. I think college students should consider their schoolwork their job and outside employment should be kept to a minimum. I am in a difficult spot because I make too much money at my job to be considered for much financial aid yet I’d rather work part-time and go to school full-time but I cannot afford to do so. Financial Aid is definitely skewed in my opinion.”

Mixed

- “I feel it has both contributed and detracted from my ability to succeed in college. It contributes by keeping my mind occupied and helps me learn to multitask. It detracts by keeping me too busy in order not to have enough time to focus on homework and studying.”
- “If I was not working two jobs, I would definitely have more time to study and dedicate more time to my studies and apply myself more. But through my work I have learned to be responsible and I have applied that responsibility towards my school career.”

NA

- “None”
- “Not Sure”

Notes

1. All the occupations listed in this paragraph are from a recent survey of students at my university.
2. Data collected by my own institution suggest that students with greater “unmet need” tend to have lower GPAs and seem to progress more slowly (or fail to progress) toward their degrees compared to students who are not financially obligated to work. “Unmet need” itself is a tidy euphemism for the stark disparity between many students’ income-based “Expected Family Contributions” and financial aid packages versus the actual costs of their college education (not to mention rent, food, phone, and gasoline bills). Our Office of Institutional Research concludes that students with higher “unmet need” have lower GPAs and lower retention rates, and they are less successful in their progress toward their degrees (“Academic Progress of Beginner Students 2007 to 2011,” specifically “Factors Related to Credit Hour Completion” 3). The university’s conclusions about the lower retention rates of students with “unmet need” are also apparent in Slide 13, “Unmet Financial Need by First Semester GPA (2011 Beginners Cohort).” (Documents withheld to protect the privacy of survey respondents but available on request.)
3. Not surprisingly, the variation in findings has much to do with the differing student populations being studied. However, John Robert Warren makes the case that the wide variation in findings is also due to some researchers employing “zero-sum” models that expect hours committed to work will detract from academic studies and others employing “primary orientation” models that expect student motivation and time management to be determining factors (3). Another complication involves the differing measure of academic achievement employed by various studies. Marvin A. Titus argues that GPA and time-to-degree should not be the only measures of achievement: his study shows that working more hours during the third year of college tends to slow students’ progress toward degree completion, sometimes significantly beyond six years; however, he points out that students who eventually complete the degree earn higher salaries than their faster-paced counterparts because employers factor in those job-based skills (277).
4. These statistics from a 2008 US Department of Education report (qtd. in Baum) appear to be holding steady, as suggested by a 2013 Citigroup survey (Fottrell) and as confirmed by 2015 NSSE data showing that 52 percent of first-year students and 85 percent of seniors work for pay, and that the majority of employed students put in significant hours (more than fifteen per week) working off campus.

5. In developing these class assignments and materials, I benefited from a rich array of work-related curricula discussed by Shannon Carter, Tony Scott, David Seitz, Ira Shor, and James Zebroski, among others.

6. Although it was cited in a 2011 *Newsweek* report as one of “America’s Dying Cities” based on the depopulation that resulted from the disappearance of its manufacturing base, our city has made solid progress toward revitalization that has included attracting newer technology-based jobs and culture-shifting corporations such as Apple, Starbucks, and Whole Foods.

7. Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner point out the challenges involved in really hearing students’ stories, even those volunteered outside the constraints of a classroom setting (such as in an anonymous survey like mine). In addition to the difficulty of really hearing what students are saying, and allowing for the intrusion of “official scripts” on both sides, the meaning of key terms is contingent and shifts as global-local conditions shift—and understanding those revised meanings is something that teachers and students must work on continuously and together (116–18). The intrusion of those “official scripts” for students responding to the survey and for my interpretation of those responses has been one of the greatest challenges of this piece. Having asked students to speak, however, I can’t neglect the opportunity to project those voices even at the risk of distorting them and producing a simulacrum rather than the snapshot I have tried to represent here (Lu and Horner 126).

8. The reality of employment for students attending Midwestern University (a pseudonym used to protect the privacy of student survey participants) is typical of students at similar institutions across the country in terms of economic and employment statistics: over 70 percent of students work for pay off campus (NSSE 2015), and about 47 percent of students attend school part-time (*Factbook* 9). The campus is housed in a smallish city (population roughly 100,000), and the university mostly attracts students who live nearby (92 percent from the state and 81 percent from the two surrounding counties) (*Factbook* 11). The average family annual income is under \$36,000, so it makes sense that most of them need to take jobs in order to help pay for their college education (Office of Institutional Research).

9. Out of the total Midwestern University student population to whom the survey was sent in May 2013 (roughly 8,400), 412 students chose to participate. Although this participation rate was gratifyingly large for a survey of this kind, it did not yield statistically significant data, given the possible self-selection factors that motivated the respondents to participate in an anonymous survey, nor data as broadly representative as NSSE data, which are drawn from a larger

participation pool (by comparison, 2013 NSSE data regarding my institution were based on 983 student responses).

10. In terms of the demographics for this survey population, the most immediately characterizing factor is that students for the most part live locally and commute to campus: 92 percent of students are from the state, 81 percent are from the two immediate counties in which our university is housed, and only about 3 percent live in campus housing (*Factbook* 11). The average age of our students has dropped over the last ten years and is currently about 23, with 40 percent of students under 20 and 26 percent of them 25 or older (*Factbook* 10). The majority of our students are white (79 percent) and female (60 percent); we have about 8 percent African American students and 7 percent Hispanic and Latino students (*Factbook* 12–13).

11. All quoted survey responses are unedited except for occasional spelling or spacing corrections or when indicated by bracketed insertions or deletions.

12. Carter tracks the history of this “impasse” in a useful way, starting from Pat Bizzell’s 1992 introduction to *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*, and develops her own “pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity” partly as a negotiation of that impasse (56–59). David Seitz’s *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness: Practicing a Pedagogy of Humility* also explores and mediates that seeming impasse.

13. Scholarship on “learning transfer” underscores the need to understand learning as contextual, relational, transformative (for both learners and their environment), and continually evolving—a process of “becoming” (Hager and Hodkinson 631–33). Paul Hager and Phil Hodkinson argue that many of the studies pointing to the difficulty of learning transfer have been attempting to identify learning as a measurable product rather than considering how “the skills, knowledge and understanding developed through workplace practice are also reconstituted within each individual worker,” for whom the impact may be mutable and immeasurable (632–33). Doug Brent’s 2011 review of the scholarship on transfer theory similarly emphasizes that rather than directly transferring discrete skills and knowledge sets from their academic training into job settings, students making successful professional transitions combine “mindful abstraction,” “metacognition,” and “reflection”: that is, the ability to abstract from the specific principles and practices learned in one setting in order to build on them or “transform” them (rather than simply reuse them) in new contexts (Brent 404, 413). Michelle Navarre Cleary looks specifically at the opportunities and challenges involved in the transfer of identity-based learning from workplace settings into college writing.

14. The problems of rising college costs, decreases in available funding, and the resulting increases in “unmet need” and student debt have been substantiated in a number of recent news articles. The *New York Times* “Degrees of Debt” series provides one of many examples: “Nationally, state and local spending per college student, adjusted for inflation, reached a 25-year low this year, jeopardizing the long-held conviction that state-subsidized higher education is an affordable steppingstone for the lower and middle classes. All the while, the cost of tuition and fees has continued to increase faster than the rate of inflation, faster even than medical spending. If the trends continue through 2016, the average cost of a public college will have more than doubled in just 15 years, according to the Department of Education” (Martin and Lehren).

15. Scott points to the understandable but, for him, ultimately damaging efforts of many “pragmatist” WPAs to develop “coping strategies” and work within the system as best they can (184). Instead, he argues, “it is essential to continually name the contradictions and inadequacies in our programs, scholarship, and pedagogy—to keep pushing the issues to the forefront and to be willing [to] make strategic, if controversial, moves to address them” (186). Those moves for Scott include cutting first-year writing programs altogether when necessary to avoid tacitly accepting and thereby “naturalizing” “the harsh, intellectually debilitating contradictions created by business as usual in postsecondary writing” (186). In contrast, Carter aligns herself with Richard E. Miller’s *As If Learning Mattered* in making the case that we can work within the system to prevent intractable and sometimes “poisonous” bureaucratic structures, such as “standardized testing and ‘accountability’ rhetoric,” from becoming “paralyzing” (Carter 5). While Scott would probably see Carter as a “pragmatist,” her strategies for running an effective basic writing program in the midst of Texas’s straightjacketing testing and literacy policies seem in fact to offer a powerful lifeline to the students in her community by extending the pedagogy of “rhetorical dexterity” from the classroom to become a kind of administrative philosophy, a new way of understanding student literacies and thereby a way to resculpt the institution’s definition of them. Although I have had days as a WPA where Scott’s draconian tactics seemed attractive, I am aligning myself with Carter and Miller in this debate by continuing to look for ways “within the system” to address the institutional constraints and blind spots around the issue of student employment.

16. Those economic forces have already shifted somewhat even during the writing of this article, with rising degrees of student debt on the one hand but with some promising changes as well. These positive trends include the increases in the minimum wage legislated by several states, which might mean some students can decrease their work hours to better balance their academic com-

mitments. This issue has gone from being a quixotic fantasy for progressives to becoming a central concern in the 2016 presidential election cycle. Starbucks's move to partner with Arizona State University to offer some employees free or reduced tuition for online degrees suggests the potential for similar employer/university collaborations (Pérez-Peña). President Obama's proposed initiative to provide free tuition for many students completing the first two years of community college suggests the potential for more inclusive educational opportunities in the future (Davis and Lewin). Recent legal challenges to "on-call" scheduling policies at some corporations that subject employees to unpredictable hours, fluctuating wages, and unpaid time commitments might also benefit working students (Gibson). All these shifts, however partial or mired in competing interests, suggest potential ways in which student employment might become a more manageable and complementary part of the larger college experience.

17. These conversations could extend to students and their advisers as well, not only to review the hours and specific experiences involved in their jobs as part of the degree-planning process, but also to discuss the implications of that work vis-à-vis their academic studies. Such discussions might include listing skills gained on the job and tracking negative job experiences in side-by-side comparisons with the academic learning outcomes from their course work, including attention to the overlaps and disjunctions. Career service offices could in turn invite students to track and rate their employment experiences, to flag supportive local employers in order to make those employers known to other prospective student applicants, and to invite those employers to partner with the university in planning flexible job schedules aimed at helping students speed time to degree. While career service offices at many universities are superb at offering these kinds of resources, they tend to focus solely on career-oriented, internship or postdegree prospective employers and overlook the actual jobs students are doing while attending college. By recognizing the value of lower-status, everyday jobs in terms of their impact on students' professional identity kits, institutions could work with supportive local businesses and forward-thinking national chains to cultivate collaborative, mutually beneficial intersections between work and school.

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