

FORUM

ISSUES ABOUT PART-TIME AND CONTINGENT FACULTY

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From the Editor: The Invisible Work of Writing Center Professionals

Vandana Gavaskar

For the past few issues, *Forum* has focused on a topic or issue with the goal that several voices and perspectives may resonate together. The last issue (CCC 65.1) was dedicated to advocacy for NTT faculty in public contexts, which created such digital spaces as *New Faculty Majority* and *Adjunct Nation*. In that issue, Joshua Boldt of *Adjunct Nation* and Tracy Donhardt of the *New Faculty Majority* described the grassroots efforts that lead to the dynamic advocacy of these groups. Dayna Godstein and Sarah Ghoshal described their intellectual work in digital media as providing professional contexts in a Web 2.0 world.

In keeping with the new paradigm, this issue of *Forum* is devoted to the often invisible work of writing center professionals whose status as NTT faculty/administrators/tutors has a complex history in the almost one century that writing centers have been in existence. As Elizabeth H. Boquet describes in “‘Our Little Secret’: A History of Writing Centers, Pre- to Post-Open Admissions,” the role of writing centers is revealing of the politics of our field in relation to labor practices: “In general, our field has failed to consider writing centers an important area into composition’s politics of location, yet writing centers remain one of the most powerful mechanisms whereby institutions can make the bodies of students as foreign, alien to

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About *Forum*

Forum is published twice a year by the Conference on College Composition and Communication. The editor, Vandana Gavaskar, invites you to submit essays related to non-tenure-track faculty in college English or composition. Of particular interest are impacts on the professionalization of the field of rhetoric and composition, the creation of best practices models in diverse academic environments, and the impact of accreditation standards on contingency. Administrators of writing programs and scholars in the field are invited to write about the issues from their perspective.

Essays should address theoretical and/or disciplinary debates. They will go through the standard peer-review and revision process.

Submissions for the fall issue should be received no later than April 1; for the spring issue, the deadline is August 1. Note: Submissions will not be returned. Submit your work electronically and put the words “*Forum* article” in your subject line. Submissions should include your name, your title(s), your institution(s), home address and phone number, institutional address(es) and phone number(s), and if applicable, venue(s) where submission was published or presented previously.

For further information and to make submissions, please contact Dr. Vandana Gavaskar, Editor, *Forum*, at 252-335-3720 or vggavaskar@mail.ecsu.edu.

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themselves” (463). Writing centers also remain one of the most powerful mechanisms through which institutions can make writing center professionals contingent or supplementary. The institutional roles of the tutor, the coordinator, the assistant director, and the director cannot be easily categorized. Undergraduate peer tutors, for example may be seen in the context of professional development and apprenticeship—preparing tutors to be graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). Graduate tutors also follow this paradigm of apprenticeship, whereas the labor of GTAs straddles the divide of apprenticeship and professional work.

Writing centers can be defined in relation to the work of English departments, learning centers, and the digital commons and can have satellite locations in libraries, in dorms, or at study tables, wherever students are supported in their academic work. They are created by institutional needs, grant opportunities, and discretionary budgets. As budgets have become severely strained in the current financial crisis in higher education—in this decade of increasing assessments and accountability—the work of writing center professionals has become increasingly contingent. Writing center directors, coordinators, tutors, staff, and faculty can be tenured faculty with course releases (these faculty members wear many hats), but they can also be independent administrative positions or NTT positions and seen as “at-will” positions. Tutors, too, are drawn from many groups: they can be peer tutors, adjuncts, instructors, graduate tutors, or professional

tutors. Deciding which groups to draw upon to staff a writing center is usually a budget decision based on the exigencies of funding, available personnel, and student populations. In addition, the growing success of online tutoring websites like SMARTTHINKING and MyComplab remove the specific institutional contexts of writing centers to create a writing pedagogy that is dependent on NTT professionals hired by corporations. In such contexts, it is challenging for writing center professionals to create viable and stable careers in higher education.

This issue of *Forum* is focused on the history, theory, and labor-engagement of NTTs in writing centers and is focused on the following:

- writing centers and the ability to create more viable NTT careers in higher education;
- trends and impacts—the space of the writing center in the context of higher education;
- the roles of writing center employees—staff, faculty, and administrators; and
- advocacy by writing center organizations: position statements, resources, mission statements, development of work standards and expectations.

This is *Forum's* first issue to focus on writing centers, and we have only scratched the surface of how the field can be instructive to labor and contingency issues.

In “Contingency as a Writing Lab Coordinator: Defining Spatiality,” *Forum* contributor Elizabeth Busekrus writes about the space of the writing center as supplementary in the Derridean sense of filling a lack (that isn't really a lack). The Academic Success Center, of which she is the coordinator, targets students who are on academic probation, but she resists its categorization as a grammar “fix-it” shop. Such an effort echoes the ongoing struggle of writing centers to develop a peer-centered learning pedagogy in the context of budget-related benchmarks and rationales such as the academic success of students.

Elizabeth Vincelette's contribution is a case study of a writing center director and the professional advantages that position confers in the context of a temporary NTT position. Her essay, “Indefinite Interim: Dualities and Divisiveness in Contingent Writing Center Directorship,” describes how writing center directors may be appointed in the current financial climate. Her experience, related to her institution's QEP (Quality Enhancement Plan), sustains the writing center's focus on academic writing in the disciplines, while her status as interim director creates an interim academic self.

Forum contributor Andrew Rihn describes examples of what Min-Zhan Lu refers to as the “politics of linguistic innocence” in the work of writing centers. A professional tutor, his essay “Writing Centers and the Intellectual Labor of Sexual Differ-

ence” describes the terrain of language and discourse as sites of struggle and identity. How should tutors respond to student writing that may challenge the diversity values of an institution? What are the costs to the professional identity of writing center professionals in the context of student views that may be discriminatory to the sexual/ racial/cultural identity of the tutor? Rihn’s specific example reflects broadly on the ethical work of writing centers as well as the specific context of his professional identity.

We are continuing to accept submissions on this topic. Please consider contributing to *Forum* in these rapidly changing times of budget cuts and fiscal uncertainties. Ideas on this topic and others that impact all our lives are welcome.

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Contingency as a Writing Lab Coordinator: Defining Spatiality

Elizabeth Busekrus

When I began working as a writing coach at Missouri Baptist University (MBU), I learned the familiar adage that a tutor must wear many hats: the friend, the trainer, and the collaborator being only a few (Ryan and Zimmerelli 28–29). Now, as the writing lab coordinator at MBU, I see this metaphor of “many hats” strained as the writing lab attempts to find its place within the university. Often writing centers become trapped in a place or within a particular identity, and “when we define ourselves to our colleagues in more academic, ‘fixed’ places of our institutions, we know we’re not telling the whole story—and they’re not hearing it” (Sunstein 9). In this place, writing centers are looked at as a contingent species, a latch onto the university, unsustainable without university support, but a resource to cut whenever financial problems form, and any faculty who fall underneath this umbrella become marked as contingent as well.

My department, the Academic Success Center, developed out of the issue of student retention; we primarily targeted (and continue to center our attention on) students entering the university on academic probation. Our place in the university depends upon our success in increasing student retention. While I am an advocate

of student success, I try to overturn the substandard images that others have of the writing lab, namely of a grammar “fix-it shop” (North 437) and of a service only for remedial students. I encourage faculty and staff to envision the writing lab as an opportunity for writers to see the different dimensions writing can take. Unfortunately, interpreting the writing lab’s mission in this way leads to the difficulty of assessing it. Writing centers require a space and funding but do not produce college credit or grades; therefore, they become marked as remediation centers (Carino 97). Being under the umbrella of the Academic Success Center, the MBU Writing Lab has developed the reputation of a remedial, service-oriented organization, limiting its scope (which narrows my job’s focus). My role becomes marginalized because writing labs “have been difficult to classify in the taxonomy of university entities” (Carino 97). However, this year, we are redefining our identity, using our many hats to satisfy the institution’s goals for success and student retention and to meet the needs of students on campus. My job involves meeting students individually to brainstorm ideas, reorganize thoughts, clarify phrases or paragraphs, and discover a new perspective on writing. I also organize workshops, market our services by presenting to classes and making advertisements, and differentiate the writing lab through our biannual writing contest, social forum “The Writing Space,” and National Day on Writing activities.

How the writing lab defines its purpose as a department is significant for my value on campus. Presenting the writing lab as appealing to all student writers (i.e., emphasizing tutoring as a conversation and showing the perpetuation of writing in all disciplines), I reach an assortment of writers, leading to a growth in numbers and more job security for me. I play off the idea that writing is a collage of texts, processes, conversations, acts, expressions, discoveries, joys, sorrows, and creations. While showing writing’s omnipresence, I also note the MBU Writing Lab’s “space-less” place:

A writing center cannot define itself as a space—we’re often kicked out of our spaces. It’s not a pedagogy. We’re always re-articulating our pedagogy. It’s certainly not an academic department. It crosses all disciplines. A writing center does not produce a text—the texts in writing centers are unfinished. And we don’t own the texts our students create; those texts are cross-curricular, cross-linguistic, cross-discursive. (Sunstein 8–9)

The writing lab uses metaphor as a central focus: the writing process as a cup of coffee, writing and rock climbing, and the writing lab as a *kairos* center, a bridge worker, a border crosser, and a deep map. While I might be the primary author of this deep map, “shaping the state of the places . . . and the kinds of places we can help those locations become” (Brooke and McIntosh 147), the students and faculty I meet with have the chance to reshape the writing lab.

To establish myself as more permanent on campus, I cater to the faculty and the students. I build alliances with faculty: laying out the writing lab's goals, doing in-class workshops, and allowing them to affect what the writing lab does for their students. Though the writing lab's specific place is a windowless room in the corridor of the basement, we have spatial movability. As a conditional employee, I actually have more free range in implementing creativity because I act as the "middle man" between the administration's expectations of collegiate writing and the students' current writing levels. In this "borderland," I deal with the "[negotiation] between and among intersecting and clashing cultures, languages, literacies, discourses, and disciplines" (Severino 2). Filled with these masses, the writing lab is directionless yet perfectly attuned and engaged with each individual.

In this way, the writing lab is a radical space, where the ESL student uses imperfect English, the counselor goes beyond the twelve-step program, and the composition student steps outside the five-paragraph formula. I allow for this manipulation of the writing context because of the uniqueness of each tutoring session. Glover emphasizes working toward "'kairos-consciousness,' a readiness to respond appropriately to the opportunities created in the tutor-client relationship" (15). To me, *kairos* represents this movement of constantly redefining and expanding the limitations of what writing is. It is that climax, that breakthrough, where the student writer understands and identifies with the writing.

A few weeks ago, a student came to the writing lab needing help on an illustration paper; her prompt was "Being a musician requires heart, mind, and soul." Her five paragraphs contained the cliché of "practice makes perfect" and other sayings about pouring one's heart into the music. As we began to talk about what music meant to her, she became animated, and I urged her to put that energy into her essay. The generalized statements did not possess as much impact as her musical identity did. While the numbers often determine if writing centers receive more funding (Lerner 201) and if I continue to have a job, these moments of *kairos* cannot be quantified. Our writing lab's space cannot be defined in one place but as layers of space: the physical writing lab, the campus, and the space beyond the university (Hemmeter and Mee 5).

There's a constant pull-and-tug from the administration and faculty to streamline different objectives for the writing lab. Similar to Hemmeter and Mee, I use the boundaries of academic writing supplied by the institution but expound upon them. I center my theory on the broader outcomes of producing better student writers, thinkers, and learners and developing a writing community. Sidney Dobrin claims that "space is yet to be written" (Dobrin 17), and this assertion defines the scope of the writing lab. Contingency works to my benefit here because I can have many

hats. I work to uncover the unexplored territories, the unthought-of places, and the marginalized, composing a script on this unwritten space.

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Elizabeth Busekrus is the writing lab coordinator at Missouri Baptist University and is currently studying for her M.A. in English with a specialization in the teaching of writing at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Indefinite Interim: Dualities and Divisiveness in Contingent Writing Center Directorship

Elizabeth Vincelette

My work as a contingent, NTT faculty member and writing center (WC) director is marked by continual instability, the negotiation of a divided scholarly self, what Kate Pantelides calls a “hyphenated identity” (28). I frame my professional reality in terms of duality, divisiveness, and binaries—what I teach to my composition students as the *either/or* fallacy. Such divisions do not address the numerous facets of the work, the lived reality of the in-between, or as a friend of mine said when discussing Derridian literary theory, the illusion of the binary in the first place.

Divided Professional Identity: Indefinite Interim

For the sake of addressing the problem of being a contingent faculty member directing a WC, I need the structure of binaries to consider the benefits and costs of my role. One plus is a better title. For contingent faculty, the awareness of where one ranks remains at the forefront of one’s professional identity and ego. For myself, an NTT faculty member who holds a PhD at the rank of lecturer, and who works at the institution where I earned my doctorate, the title of “Director” possesses an appeal, and from a practical standpoint, it lends me an ethos at times necessary when I interact with full-time, career tenured professors or deans, particularly when I’m conducting workshops offering ways to improve their teaching of writing.

My split duties as faculty and administrator remain inseparable from the feeling that my work is never done nor done well. Often I consider the old cliché about wearing too many hats, an image, however convenient, that obscures the way in which my teaching experience informs my directorship, particularly with ideas about how to teach writing and with my mentorship of writing center tutors, what Pantelides describes as aspects “rest[ing] beneath our lesson plans, adding depth and richness to what we research, study, and teach” (29).

Furthermore, I have the benefit and privilege of meeting faculty and administrators from across campus and developing partnerships usually not available to contingent faculty, such as working with student affairs and academic conduct offices, representing our services on a Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) review board for the university’s accreditation, and providing numerous workshops and talks on campus—from guidance to faculty on designing writing assignments, to teaching graduate teaching assistants from India how to assess American-style essays, to training faculty in how to give feedback on writing as part of a quality enhancement plan (QEP). The QEP at my university comprises

a \$2.9 million initiative to improve upper-division undergraduate writing within all disciplines and has been implemented through workshops and action plans (grants). Because of my WC director work, I have more intimate knowledge of the QEP and have been a guest speaker in workshops focused on writing instruction and have taught faculty from across campus how to use screencast software to provide formative feedback and assessment of writing (which, in turn, has led to several publications). In addition, I've had the opportunity to parlay those experiences into winning a grant to train faculty as part of a research study. Thus, my WC directorship has led me to a large number of professional benefits I would otherwise not have known.

The detraction of my status, therefore, may be more difficult to see, as it is an internal struggle I face, like many WC directors who are also contingent faculty, and who, like me, began their writing center work fulfilling temporary positions. We work understanding the shifting sands underneath the foundation of our professional identity, as contingent faculty susceptible to economic change and often as provisional WC directors, as well. In my case, I am an indefinite interim for a full-time, tenure-track WC director's position imagined by my department but not yet funded, a position I would be discouraged from applying for in a department that (understandably) avoids hiring its own. (I work as NTT faculty where I received my PhD because I'm geographically bound, which is a nice way of saying married, in a partnership, or otherwise not moving because of a relationship or family situation.)

Despite these challenges, and although funding may not be readily available for professional development of contingent faculty, many of us nonetheless work toward an overarching goal in the WC community to professionalize. But nowhere in my job description is professional development encouraged, nor does my contract indicate that I direct the WC at all, because my *actual* contract is for teaching 4-4 as a lecturer, a position that does not require service or pursuit of scholarly publication. In order to direct the WC, I am "released" from some of my teaching duties. What I *do* have is the title and an outdated description of the WC director's position that does not reflect the changes attendant to the job after the WC moved to a learning commons causing collaborative opportunities (and the demands of the job) to expand.

Divided Spaces: Everywhere and Nowhere

Geography, boundaries, and physical space inform the contingency of WC directors, literally and metaphorically. I move hour by hour between the WC and my classrooms and permanent office in another building. Another binary emerges—I'm everywhere and nowhere, struggling to put in "face time" in my own department

because I'm seen more frequently by those in other departments, none of whom are responsible for writing my performance evaluation. Furthermore, my evaluation does not reflect my WC duties at all, because my evaluation as a NTT instructor is based almost solely on student evaluations of my teaching (as part of what Janet Ruth Heller calls an "unjust system" of evaluation of NTT work).

Because of my mobility and the paradox of *high* and *no* visibility, I convince myself there's a freedom in what I do, an allure of the flexible, split position. Yet I'm always bothered by the numbers game. After all, in the words of Jeanne Simpson, who presents an argument that speaks directly to a WC director's monetary value from an institutional perspective: "Writing center directors interact with and support far far [sic] more students than most faculty, especially over a long career. Really cost-effective both in terms of direct instruction but also in terms of representing the institution to many constituents: parents, faculty, prospective students, actual students, tutors, alumni, donors."

All of these personal and economic realities leave me faced with more questions than possible solutions: Do I forgo the upper-level literature classes I teach and request lower-level composition classes in order to have fewer students? Do I do so as an indefinite interim knowing that if I were to return to full-time teaching I may never be able to get back those hard-won upper-level classes? Do I leave the writing center knowing that it will continue to augment my CV in a way that my classroom teaching cannot? Do I cast aside WC partnerships, institutional knowledge, and mentoring to return full-time to the classroom, teaching mostly general education, service courses, and "[reaffirm] writing instructors' standing as workers in a way that ultimately betrays their [my] status as intellectuals" (Hammer, A4)? Do I realize that continuing on with approximately 70 students a semester and the management of the WC at an institution that serves 25,000 students will doubtless lead to burnout?

I don't want to conclude with negatives, questions, and some sort of dire vision of the status quo, and I want to resist what Marc Bousquet calls "'teacher hero' narratives of exploited pedagogical labor" (162). I want to believe that the future of WCs and of contingent faculty WC directors will improve, as "the idealized notion of the university don teaching his or her courses and then retiring to an afternoon or evening of careful reading and thoughtful contemplation has slipped so far out of common practice that it might as well be a historical curiosity" (Day et al., 187). And I want to continue to believe that WCs can provide a space in which viable NTT careers in higher education will emerge.

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Elizabeth Vincelette, Ph.D., is a lecturer in the English department and the director of the writing center at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia.

Writing Centers and the Intellectual Labor of Sexual Difference

Andrew Rihn

"A professional identity in writing centers," according to Anne Ellen Geller and Harry Denny, "is still not understood as a professional identity in English" (123). Writing center professionals are quite self-aware about their marginalized position within the field of English, a marginalization expressed in the paucity of representation within major journals: Geller and Denny note that *College English* and *College Composition and Communication* combined have published only one article related to writing centers in the last ten years (120). The perception of the writing center professional as something of a floating signifier in English is heightened by the lack of uniformity in institutional status: some have standing as faculty, others as administrators. Similarly, some are tenure-track while others rely on at-will contracts. While much can be said about the professional status of these hard-working academics and the everyday labor issues they encounter, I wish to refocus my comments here to a different stratum of writing center worker: the tutors themselves.

Most college writing centers are staffed by students (undergraduate, graduate, or both), and thus place a premium on a “peer-centered” dynamic that cannot be re-created in the hierarchical context of the classroom. These tutors work one-on-one with writers, talking not only about thesis statements and MLA formatting, but also about writers’ varying literacy backgrounds (different disciplines, linguistic and/or cultural backgrounds, abilities, educational experience, etc.). In doing so, they end up learning a great deal about the literacies promoted or rejected on campus, all while taking coursework themselves (and often maintaining other jobs as well). At the same time, they occupy one of the lowest rungs on the academic hierarchy, receiving few benefits nor job security. So long as their position remains under-theorized, our schema of the intellectual and material labor of composition remains incomplete.

There is plenty that needs to be said about the status of and compensation for writing tutors, and yet I’d like to suggest an examination of professional concerns beyond compensation, benefits, and status. When writing centers are understood as sites of difference and diversity where workers (both students and tutors) enact and negotiate ideological forms of literacy, concerns around identity and identification must be viewed as always already present. Despite periodic calls to maintain a separation between identity and “professional” academic work (e.g., Stanley Fish’s “Save the World on Your Own Time”), I maintain that identity work *is* a professional concern. Following Jonathan Alexander’s “provocation” on literacy and diversity, I note that one’s treatment in the public sphere certainly informs the performance and perception of one’s workplace duties (165). He states, “Yes, our humanity may be shared, but our positioning *within* the hierarchies of that humanity is most definitely *not* shared” (167, emphasis in original).

In looking at how categories of identity and otherness may inform or regulate the work of the writing center, I wish to focus on the single axis of sexual identity,¹ a subject I have considered before. In 2013, Jay D. Sloan and I compiled a bibliography of scholarship concerning the overlap between LGBTQ communities and the field of writing centers (Rihn and Sloan). In a body of scholarship spanning over thirty years, we found only fourteen articles. In our article accompanying the bibliography, we advocated for “critical reflection upon the needs, desires, and possibilities that reside within and between writing centers and LGBTQIA communities” (8). Furthermore, we posited viewing writing centers as unique sites for investigation, both for their liminal institutionality and their focus on peer relationships and rapport (8–9). Along those lines, I would like to consider here some of the ways a professional identity in writing centers overlaps with sexual identities, impacting (as Alexander notes) upon how we perform and perceive that profession.

Let's consider a straightforward and common example: a student brings a paper on same-sex marriage to the writing center. While the apparent ubiquity of assignments asking students to write about current events or "hot button" issues may cause us to roll our eyes, it does not necessarily diminish their impact upon readers. Indeed, in few other contexts would we allow "debate" about the validity of a person's romantic or sexual desires. And yet, students are encouraged to do this in college writing courses. Even papers taking a pro same-sex marriage position may buy in to the assignment's premise that all opinions are equally valid. Imagine the position of a tutor working with a writer who, in an opinion paper, argues that same-sex relationships are unnatural, disgusting, obscene. Imagine you are an LGBTQ tutor, and part of your job is to sit there, one-on-one, nodding your head while this student reads this paper aloud.² How might you feel? How might you respond? If the assignment is founded upon opinion, can the student be "wrong"? What ethical or professional codes might you follow? Does it matter if the student's opinion runs contrary to the stated goals of "tolerance" or "diversity" at your school? Perhaps most importantly, we must consider what responsibilities the work of the writing center places upon its tutors. If the goal of a writing center is to help students strengthen their writing, is it the tutor's responsibility to help strengthen a homophobic paper?

Sites of difference and "othering" complicate, perhaps even erode, the peer relationships and rapport that are central to the work of the writing center. In doing so, however, they threaten not only standard models of writing center practice, but the comfort and perhaps even safety of the tutor, as well. Certainly physical safety is a workplace concern, but what about comfort? To what extent can we ask peer tutors to risk their discomfort, especially if/when that discomfort is rooted in the lived experience of violence against LGBTQ communities? Responding to Jonathan Alexander's provocation, Mark McBeth describes shifting his classroom's goal to figuring out "what to do with this discomfort, how to make it productive and transformative instead of self-victimizing and incapacitating" (131). Tutors, however, do not have fifteen weeks to move through planned material. Writing center sessions happen suddenly, and often the participants begin as complete strangers. Can discomfort become "productive and transformative" in half an hour? If we agree that such a goal is pedagogically valid, can we also consider it an ethical workplace strategy?

As the trend in higher education toward using more contingent labor continues, it is vital that we look closely at labor practices in writing centers. In his article "Writing Centers in the Managed University," Daniel Mahala says that "writing centers make cash sense from the point of view of university presidents and administrators" because they are "consumer-friendly in a cost-efficient way,

providing personalized one-to-one contact at a relatively low cost" (7). This low cost is, of course, dependent largely on the work of skilled undergraduate peer tutors who often work for minimum wage and without benefits. Considering the work done by writing tutors, we must think not only of their material and "professional" concerns, but also of the complex intellectual and affective negotiations they are tasked to make. Until the wider discipline begins to account for writing centers, our understanding of intellectual labor in composition will remain woefully incomplete.

Notes

1. It is worth noting that I do not single out sexual identity from a belief that sexuality is in some way a more prominent or primary category of identity. Rather, I choose it as one category among many, noting that identities are shifting, multiple, and intersecting assemblages.
2. See Jay D. Sloan's article "Closet Consulting" for a vivid description of such a tutoring session.

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Andrew Rihn works as a writing assistant in the writing center at Stark State College.