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An Overview of the Lecturer Position in the UCLA Writing Programs

UCLA Writing Programs is made up entirely of lecturers—that is to say, non-ladder faculty. And yet Writing Programs faculty can hardly be thought of as temporary in the usual sense. Program lecturers collectively possess considerable experience and demonstrate great commitment to the undergraduate mission of the College of Letters and Science.

Lecturers in UCLA Writing Programs direct both upper and lower division writing courses, schedule courses, design curriculum, and manage a sizable budget. Lecturers are responsible for placing new students in appropriate first-year composition classes; they train and mentor teaching assistants; they help ladder faculty integrate writing instruction into disciplinary offerings; they work in committees that relate to writing instruction across the curriculum; they run searches for and hire other lecturers; they arrange “in house” colloquia that nourish both collegiality and professional growth. Lecturers here have devised and carry out a peer review process that respects their teaching mission within a large research university. Writing Programs’ lecturers are also responsible for a range of administrative duties. Some specific and especially heavy duties (scheduling, placement, special programs) earn course reductions, but much of the work is added to a full teaching load. The crucial point to underscore is that lecturers in Writing Programs *are* the program.

The range and significance of these tasks require that the program maintain a stable base of experienced professionals. Over half of the 32 current lecturers have been with UCLA for at least 15 years. Most lecturers teach full-time (and with one exception, those who do not have *chosen* to work part-time); most all have been hired as a result of a competitive national search. Writing Programs’ lecturers enjoy some limited professional perks consistent with their training, dedication, and service. Travel funds and modest in-house professional development grants are available (and Writing Programs makes its own decisions as to how its funds are to be used). Lecturers earn regular albeit small merit increases; all lecturers over 50% time receive the benefits customary for career employees (medical, dental, retirement).

The beginning salary for a lecturer in UCLA Writing Programs is slightly over \$43,000. While this is certainly low in an environment like West Los Angeles, it is in context of composition programs elsewhere—sad to say—not too bad. The initial contract is normally full-time for one year. Lecturers hired from a national search (the majority of the faculty) arrive with some expectation that both budget and instructional need will enable the program to renew their contracts for five years (given positive performance reviews). Occasionally, a lecturer will be hired to teach for one year or even less full or part time to redress a temporary shortage of TAs, to substitute for a lecturer on medical leave, or to meet other such immediate yet truly temporary needs. Writing Programs tries to avoid making such appointments, but when we do these

instructors are paid on the same per-class basis as the entry level pay for a lecturer hired from a national search; we also try to appoint short term lecturers at a percentage that will allow them to hold full benefits during the time they work for the program. As much as possible, we want to avoid reinforcing the culture of (and exploiting the existence of) part-time temporary instructors. We also believe that students at UCLA have reason to expect the quality of instruction that a stable professional environment encourages.

Such an environment also requires some kind of responsible oversight, and again, Writing Programs supplies most of that from within. Every lecturer on a one-year contract undergoes a review in the spring term that is managed by a committee made up of continuing lectures and the program Director. That review involves a classroom observation, an interview/discussion, and a survey of course materials and of student evaluation forms. Although these reviews are ultimately evaluative, they are not exclusively about re-appointment; they also serve as a mechanism to help promising new lecturers progressively define a significant role in the program. This is important, because a major review takes place in the sixth year of teaching that requires lecturers to demonstrate not merely “competence” in the classroom, but “excellence.” Reviewers (a committee elected by and from those lecturers who have been through the major review) look for inventive curriculum, a coherent and theoretically informed series of class activities, a sophisticated and thoughtfully sequenced set of assignments, and an ability to handle a variety of courses. Student response is culled not only from course evaluation forms, but also from formal letters of support—the program solicits letters from students drawn randomly from the grade sheets and solicits an equal number of others recommended by the instructor (we do exclude from the random list the names of students who received a grade lower than C in the course). Reviewers also consider how excellence may be evident in broader contexts: contributions to the program, the university, or the profession. Publications and off campus professional activities count to the degree they bear upon our teaching mission.

For many years, a candidate deemed “excellent” by the Writing Programs personnel committee and then confirmed by the English department’s executive committee and the Dean of Humanities received a three-year, renewable contract. This created a laborious and largely unproductive cycle of reviews where the candidate was, in effect, reapplying for the job every third year (and reviewed by others in the same fast-spinning cycle). About three years ago, lecturers system wide won a new contract that revised the process in an important way; now lecturers who successfully move through the major review are given a “continuing” contract. Subsequent reviews (every third year) become evaluations of merit. Although a lecturer on a continuing contract can be dismissed, that dismissal can only be justified by “instructional need” (the elimination of a department or a set of required courses could invoke this provision) or by the lecturer’s clear failure to sustain the quality of work that earned the initial appointment (the program and/or the College would need to document that failure thoroughly).

I do not want to suggest that our system here is ideal or that it presents a model all others should follow. Because lecturers are not ladder appointments, Writing Programs has been vulnerable to budget cuts. However accomplished they may be, lecturers on one year contracts can lose their jobs to funding shifts. And the program’s curricular plans can be quickly undone by budget cuts. Still, Writing Programs has enjoyed a level of support that has enabled it to contribute much to UCLA’s undergraduate mission over the past twenty seven years. The successes we’ve had would not have been possible without the university’s acknowledgment that our work is both important and ongoing.