



NEWS



Bucking the Trend, St. John's U. Converts Instructors Into Tenure-Track Professors

By [Audrey Williams June](#) | MAY 15, 2009

Scholars who teach composition, a staple on the schedule of many a college freshman, often wind up stringing together a series of adjunct teaching jobs while keeping an eye out for that first step on the golden track to tenure. So it is easy to see why Roseanne Gatto marvels at her good fortune. She is not quite finished working on her dissertation but has almost finished her first year as an assistant professor of writing at St. John's University. "This was huge for me," says Ms. Gatto.

Another new instructor-turned-professor, Tara Roeder, adds that "to be on the tenure track and not have to have that anxiety of not knowing whether we'll have a job or not. ... Honestly, it's so amazing."

The two are part of a group of 20 people St. John's hired to teach in its first-year writing program, part of the university's Institute for Writing Studies, which opened in 2006. All of them were hired over two years as full-time instructors on one-year, renewable contracts. But in the summer of 2008, the president and the provost decided to convert the contingent positions into tenure-track jobs.

At a time when the ravaged economy has pushed many colleges to cut faculty members from the payroll, it is unusual to hear of a college converting contingent workers into potential lifetime employees. But the university's ambition is to "have every St. John's student recognized for their writing skills," says the president, the Rev. Donald J. Harrington. Achieving that goal, he says, meant "we had to make a strategic priority to invest in a writing faculty above and beyond the English faculty."

The promotions were a move to hold on to the writing specialists. (Most are Ph.D.'s, and the rest are A.B.D., M.F.A.'s, or professors with master's degrees who have extensive teaching experience) And even though St. John's officials reached this decision before the economy tanked, the university insists that its commitment to the Institute for Writing Studies and its faculty hasn't wavered.

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"We're not cutting back," says Julia A. Upton, the provost, who backed the creation of the institute along with Father Harrington. "We want every student coming here to have full-time professors teaching writing."

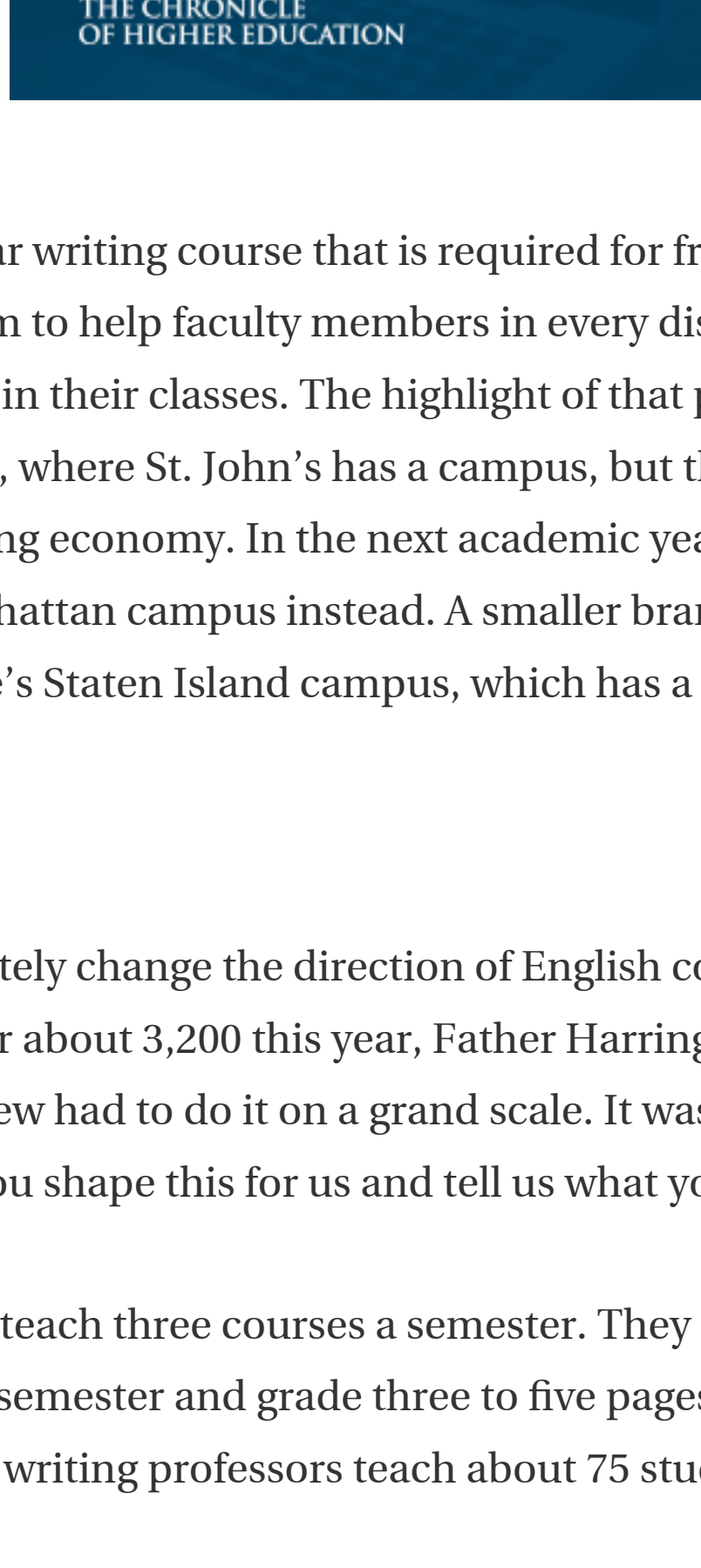
Making Writing Central

At one time, the institute that spawned the new cohort of tenure-track professors largely existed in the head of Derek V. Owens, an associate professor of English and executive director of the institute. He came to the university in 1994, when it still served mostly commuter students, and shortly afterward started its first writing center. It was "two little rooms, kind of like a clubhouse," Mr. Owens says, inside of an academic building within clear view of where the new institute sits. The center had about a dozen tutors and part-time adjuncts "who came and went," he says.

Mr. Owens had long dreamed of grander quarters that would allow the center to have a broader reach and make writing more central in the lives of the institution's 20,000 students. His dream eventually coincided with a push by Father Harrington and Ms. Upton to make sure St. John's graduates were skilled writers. A donor, also a member of the Board of Trustees, agreed to back the new academic priority with a \$2.5-million gift to build the institute. The university had set aside money to cover the salaries of the writing faculty members it planned to hire. Mr. Owens, who took the lead in drawing up a proposal for the institute, says they were lucky that all of those forces came together.

The end result: The university overhauled the first floor of the library at the main campus, in Queens, to make room for the institute, whose features include a writing center, in which roughly 45 tutors work at guiding students through research papers, abstracts, and other writing assignments; a writing-studies library; and offices for graduate students and writing professors.

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Along with the first-year writing course that is required for freshmen, the institute also operates a program to help faculty members in every discipline fine-tune the way they teach writing in their classes. The highlight of that program has been a two-week trip to Rome, where St. John's has a campus, but that perk became a casualty of the struggling economy. In the next academic year faculty members will meet at St. John's Manhattan campus instead. A smaller branch of the institute operates on the college's Staten Island campus, which has a new writing center.

A Grand Scale

"We wanted to completely change the direction of English composition" for freshmen, who number about 3,200 this year, Father Harrington says. "If we were going to do this, we knew had to do it on a grand scale. It was really us telling the English department, you shape this for us and tell us what you need."

The writing professors teach three courses a semester. They meet with each of their students three times a semester and grade three to five pages of writing per student a week. Most first-year writing professors teach about 75 students each semester.

It is not all about teaching, of course. As they strive to earn tenure, the junior professors will be judged on their research, service to the institution, and presentations at various conferences, among other things.

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Having value attached to their work isn't something the new professors take for granted. "We do a lot of teaching and conferencing, but it will count for something," says April Sikorski, who is an A.B.D. in composition and rhetoric from Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Ms. Sikorski came to St. John's from a stint as an adjunct in the writing-studies program at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. The teaching-intensive position "was never going to let me do my research, and I was just overwhelmed," says Ms. Sikorski, who can recall a time when she taught throughout the summer. As a junior faculty member at St. John's, she now uses summers to write, and "I can make decisions about my classroom and my pedagogy. There's a certain amount of authority, for me, that comes with tenure," Ms. Sikorski says.

Of course, the path to tenure includes serving on faculty and other committees "and all this business stuff that I didn't have to deal with as an instructor," says Ms. Gatto. But in return, her tenure-track status has given her a little more clout. For instance, she takes students to Lourdes, France, in the summer to do service work, and she recently designed a course in which students write books about their experience there.

For some, the prospect of being among a group of writing professors was an overwhelming bright spot. Sean Murray, who has a Ph.D. in composition from the State University of New York at Binghamton, arrived at St. John's in the summer of 2007. He had other offers at the time, but at those institutions he would have been the "only composition person on campus," he says.

The added plus of having a tenure-track job "made me more inclined and invested in staying here and making this my academic home," Mr. Murray says.

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St. John's officials want that to be the case. "This will give them the job security that is so important," says Jeffrey Fagen, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. "If they were good and wanted to stay, we wanted them to stay."

Says Ms. Gatto: "Putting us on the tenure track really speaks volumes of the trust they have in us."

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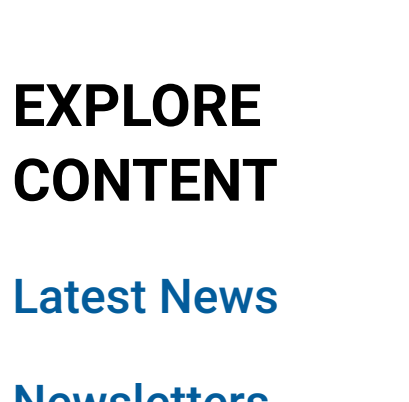
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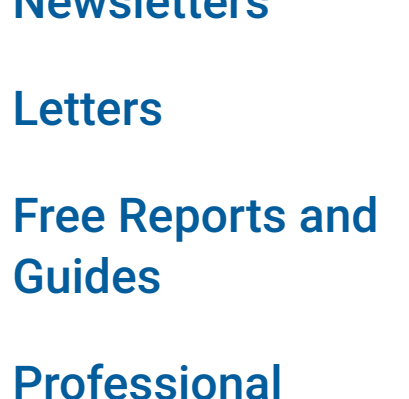
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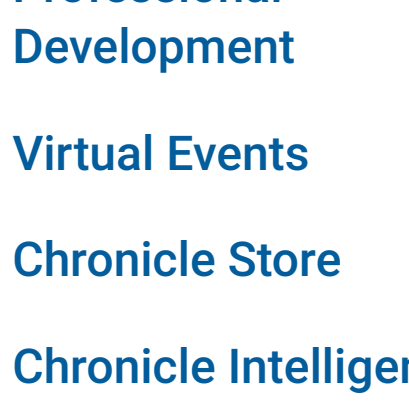
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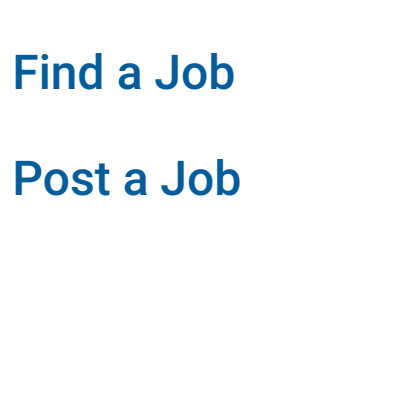
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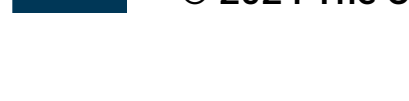


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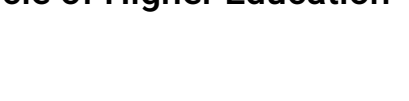


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