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Review: Queerly Centered: LGBTQIA Writing Center Directors Navigate the Workplace

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Queerly Centered: LGBTQIA Writing Center Directors Navigate the Workplace by Travis Webster

Tyler Martinez (George Mason University)

Abstract Dr. Travis Webster's monograph reports on qualitative research conducted into the working lives of 20 LGBTQIA-identifying writing center directors. From those interviews, Webster identifies three features of LGBTQIA writing center administrative labor: the unique capital with which their identities equip them, the activist labor that their identities call them to perform, and tensions between their labor and identities. He calls on writing center professionals and higher education administrators to become accomplices in the struggle against workplace injustices, moving beyond allyship that is all too often based in kind words rather than sustained action. The insights available in this book are valuable to anyone in higher education administration as they work to build more inclusive and welcoming spaces for LGBTQIA-identifying writing center professionals.

Keywords writing center, administration, LGBTQIA, qualitative research

Tension was a definitive feature of my work as an out, queer assistant director of a public university's writing center, a role I held in the final year of my master's program. My queer identity marked me as in. The scholarship of Harry Denny, Andrew Rhin, Jay D. Sloan, Travis Webster, and Jonathan Rylander created a disciplinary space for queer people and queer pedagogies. However, my readings of queer theory and inexpert positionality were challenged when I brought my budding ideas to a conference. I suspect all the above scholars have had to respond endlessly to the question "What does sex and sexuality have to do with writing centers?" Dr. Travis Webster's monograph, Queerly Centered: LGBTQIA Writing Center Directors Navigate the Workplace, provides scholars like me with a sophisticated response—queer identities provide writing center professionals and practitioners with unique capital, orient them toward activism, and foster a hyper-awareness of local, national, and global tensions regarding non-normative identity.

I open with a historical vignette, taking a cue from Dr. Webster and entering an established tradition in writing center studies. The vignettes that open each chapter of *Queerly Centered* not only illustrate participant histories

but also evidence the overlap between experience and capital, the unique orientations and epistemologies that queer people bring to writing center work. In his analysis of interviews with 20 LGBTQIA writing center directors, the themes of queer labor and/as capital, activism, and tension emerge, around which the monograph's chapters are focused. *Queerly Centered* contributes to a nuanced understanding of the labor performed by queer writing center directors while troubling the discipline's impulse toward replicable, aggregable, and data-driven (RAD) research. The discourses within transcend the local contexts of participants' writing centers, and *Queerly Centered* offers insights to anyone in writing and rhetoric studies, administrators and practitioners in academic support units, and all higher education administration.

The focus of Chapter 2, "Queer Writing Center Labor and/as Capital," is the unique capital with which queer (used interchangeably with LGBTQIA for the sake of readability in the book and this review) writing center directors are equipped. Participants' experiences ready them to be able to read rooms, uplift silenced voices, and soften masculinized spaces. Many queer writing center professionals bring

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an intersectional, activist axiology to their work. For a moment, readers are swept up in the fantasy that queer writing center directors are unicorns that are happy to check diversity boxes while upholding the hegemonic norms of institutions. That unicorn status is soundly debunked as “steeped in white privilege” by Webster’s reporting on the perspectives of two queer participants of color and one transgender participant (p. 40). Queer perspectives complicate the dominant narrative of writing center administrative labor, adding previously unconsidered elements to the concept of emotional labor that circulates in writing center studies. Furthermore, the softened and approachable persona of the queer white male is complicated by the voices of queer people of color.

As Webster acknowledges throughout the monograph, a limitation of the research is that only two LGBTQIA writing center directors of color participated in interviews. Their stories supply a counternarrative to queer, white, cisgendered participants’ perceptions of their work. Intersectionally minoritized identity categories cause those participants to avoid the performative queerness that their white counterparts often claim as capital. The softened, approachable persona that white gay male writing center directors employ is antithetical to how a Black gay male participant has been taught to navigate HBCU writing centers. He expresses dismay at the fact that there is not space for identities like his in writing center studies. From Harry Denny’s respected position in the discipline, queerness would seem to be widely accepted if not intrinsic to writing center studies. And yet, the experiences recounted in Chapter 4 of *Queerly Centered* illuminate that the white heteropatriarchy continues to create tensions for all queer writing center directors. Tensions arise from silence around issues of gender and sexuality, from explicit and, more often, implicit bullying, and from allyship that often does not manifest in material change.

Chapter 3, “Queer Writing Center Labor and/as Activism,” calls on administrators to commit to the work of building coalitions and learning from intersectionally minoritized voices. That call coincides with a shift in understanding of where and how we perform activism

as researchers and pedagogues. Webster asks nonqueer writing center practitioners to be better allies, to listen to the stories collected in this volume, and to assist in the activist projects led by queer scholars and scholars of color—perhaps, to start their own activist projects. The work that queer writing center directors perform is not captured by current conceptions of writing center labor and emotional labor; for example, some participants provide sexual health information and condoms in their centers and are asked to respond to local and national antiques rhetoric and violence. Webster reflects on the kind of activism that is available to writing center administrators—marching and mission-statement writing—and calls for sustained research on justice, equity, inclusion, and identity that foregrounds a commitment to action.

Many participants shared stories of explicit and implicit bullying in their institutions. Tensions also arise from disciplinary erasures and national political tensions to which faculty and other students expect queer writing center directors to respond. Focusing on an analysis of those tensions, Chapter 4, “Queer Writing Center Labor and/as Tension,” reveals that the majority of the bullying is implicit in action that bullies would never let their guard down enough to speak into reality. Loaded politeness in which straight and white colleagues don’t trust queer professionals’ ability to understand their own oppression or, worse, feign support until a queer person is out of earshot, is all too common. Queer professionals remain guarded and reluctant to maintain personal safety in academic spaces in ways that inevitably affect their ability to focus on their work.

One of the two participants of color is leaving his writing center and academia because his intersectional identities are kept out of conversations. The tough exterior that queer Black male participants utilize to navigate their writing centers isn’t present in or acceptable to the field. Straight, white females are the majority in writing center studies, and it often seems that the only queerness accepted is what is legible to that demographic. The field’s inability to recruit and retain queer voices of color needs to be addressed with constant, sustainable action. As Webster asks, “What might the fact

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that there are no queer women of color in this project tell us?” (p. 104). Writing center studies commits itself to diversity, equity, and inclusion, but it does not seem to be able to enact material change toward social justice through scholarship. While this field feels ahead of the curve, there is a lot of work to do.

While the methods of interviewing and coding are replicable, aggregable, and data-driven, Webster adds to a growing body of scholarship that challenges the RAD research impulse. When queer writing center practitioners are being bullied, when spaces are not being created for queer voices of color, “who cares whether the data is generalizable?” (p. 111). It ought to make everyone in higher education, and especially powerful administrators, pay more attention to bullying in their institutions. Before asking whether research is replicable, ask if the research should be replicated from your positionality. The call for activism through sustained research on identity that inspires material change is linked directly to Webster’s challenge of RAD methods. Webster encourages writing center researchers to engage in more empirical projects that foreground the voices of minoritized populations and urges people in positions of power to act on such research.

Attempting to interview and consider the unique concerns of graduate students who serve in writing centers, whether queer or not, would complicate this research. According to IWCA, graduate students shouldn’t serve as writing center administrators, but my history is evidence that they do. I suspect that a lot more of us exist, but the temporary nature of those positions prohibits the kind of sustained attention to that population that is required of research. I can report firsthand on the tension between calls to activism and navigating the poverty wages and marginal positionality afforded to graduate students. I am thankful for the opportunity and learning afforded by that position, but further research might investigate the unique capital that queer graduate students bring to positions as writing center

administrators, the activism they are interpolated to perform, and the tensions that define their work.

Queerly Centered celebrates queer people working in writing center administration and researching in writing center studies. It also provides a sobering view of the mostly white and cisgendered field. Social justice labor falls disproportionately on people of color and queer folks; white, cisgendered, and heterosexual writing center professionals might move from alliance to accomplicing, working in both words and deeds to advocate for queer colleagues and colleagues of color. Webster notes that writing program administration has traced connections between queerness, embodiment, and their labor, but scholarship focused on writing across the curriculum and its administration has not been examined through queer lenses. In localized contexts, queer advocacy is often reliant on the work of particularly energetic students and faculty, but higher education administrators rarely sustain that labor—this book’s participants provide lessons about what is possible when leadership is diverse and committed to equity. Finally, for the discipline of writing center studies, this book challenges what is considered writing center labor, expanding the definition to include localized social justice work that responds to the particular needs of students.

I come away from *Queerly Centered* energized—I’m not sure that I’ll ever direct a writing center, but I am committed to shouldering some of this Sisyphean, activist labor toward intersectional social justice. I hope that your interactions with *Queerly Centered* similarly energize you. Let’s commit ourselves, as graduate students, department chairs, academic support administrators, deans, writing center directors, and practitioners—as scholars and pedagogues—to supporting the voices and bodies that we still have not made space for, to research that guides sustained action. Not for ourselves, but for our centers and the students they serve, because, ultimately, that’s to whom these conversations matter most.