

QUEERLY CENTERED

*LGBTQA Writing Center Directors
Navigate the Workplace*

TRAVIS WEBSTER

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1

INTRODUCTION

In the early-morning hours of June 12, 2016, a terrorist entered Orlando's gay club, *Pulse*, on Latin Night and opened fire, murdering forty-nine people, injuring another fifty-three. Just before news of the shooting broke, I lay awake in a hotel room, energized, following an intensive week at that year's International Writing Centers Association Summer Institute (IWCA SI). In bed, I scrolled social media, my blood pressure rising and my mouth drying, as the earliest *Pulse* coverage surfaced in my newsfeed. I didn't sleep that night, haunted by young, queer people dying; most were people of color and from working-class backgrounds who went out just to dance in a supposed queer¹ safe space. By morning, as I packed to leave IWCA SI, I saw coverage of Eddie Jamoldroy Justice. Trapped in a *Pulse* bathroom, he texted his mother, Mina Justice, for an hour, pleading for her help and saying his goodbyes (Park 2016). Within an hour, his life went from enjoying himself at a historic gay venue to barricading himself in a bathroom with other victims, awaiting the inevitable. He stuck with me. I thought of my earlier life of going out, dancing, drinking, and enjoying gay life. I thought of queer friends of my youth, our community of 1990s gay culture. With IWCA SI fresh on my mind, I thought of my tutors, many of whom reminded me of the victims—their faces, their backgrounds, their dreams in the making.

I returned to work Monday in the writing center feeling punched in the stomach, afraid, and angry. I didn't want to talk about the events, didn't yet know how to. John, a participant in this book, who is an Orlando writing center director,² would later teach me much about articulating my complicated feelings about the *Pulse* murders. In his interview, he told me he was quite jarred by these events, which were local to his center. He struggled with the shooting but felt *Pulse*, an atrocity that impacted mostly queer, transgender, and working-class people of color, wasn't his tragedy to mourn as a privileged white gay man—a sentiment I identified with and struggle with even now. His tutors, many of whom were queer people of color who knew or knew of *Pulse* victims, contested his personal tensions. Together, he and his tutors held a writing event in

the center to help the university community cope with grief and fear, as this book's later chapters showcase. The event was critical since students at his university looked to the writing center for solace, he says, arising naturally from the intimate, one-to-one nature of writing center work. He told me then that his queer identity made him more open to such work in the first place—a theme that surfaces often in this study.

Like John, I first struggled with talking about *Pulse* with my writing center staff—what to say, what to do, whether I was the person to do this work. At first I said nothing. I was stung, distracted, paralyzed by Eddie's story and the stories of others fallen and injured. I was haunted by Texas's then-recently passed conceal-carry legislation for state universities, which would go into effect by fall 2016, whereby people could legally bring guns, concealed, onto state university campuses. Late in the day, a few tutors, queer and nonqueer alike, dropped by my office seeking community and support, asking for guidance about their own fears concerning the murders. I listened and I consoled while scared and exhausted myself, even in my privileged position and body. A senior tutor—a straight white woman in her fifties—encouraged me to write the staff and the broader community, saying I was the person to do so, referring to my out gay director identity. She said the staff needed me to write. I did. To this day, it remains the most difficult professional correspondence I've ever produced.³

In my memo to my staff, I offered my office for *Pulse* conversations for anyone who needed support. In my office, I heard fear and anger. I heard anxiety about similar events happening at our university—a Hispanic-serving institution on the cusp of conceal-carry legislation in a conservative state. My tutors feared similar events could take place specifically at our center given our very “out” social justice mission and our staff made up of many queer people and queer people of color. This work was somewhere between profoundly rewarding and deeply uncomfortable. I felt equipped for (as participant John alludes to) and called to do this work, like many other queer writing center administrators, which is to say that as a queer writing center director, I wasn't alone. I noticed through disciplinary venues, such as the WCenter Listserv and IWCA social media, that it was most often queer practitioners who labored to help others make sense of the tragedies through writing center outreach. I noticed and heard through private and public conversations that queer directors had complicated feelings about this work, understanding the labor as critically necessary and deeply embodied but emotionally trying and occasionally exhausting.

I start with this story because, from that memory alone, this project will always be hauntingly enmeshed in how I think about my work as a

queer writing center director. This book is about queer people and queer work, but stories like these speak to us all in the discipline, regardless of our orientations. I say this not only because we are empathetic and compassionate about tragedies upon queer bodies but also because these events that impact bodies shape our work—as administrative leaders, as disciplinary professionals, and as people—in writing centers beyond the work of tutoring. *Pulse* led me to think about my queer body and my administration, especially the ways queer writing center labor intersects with national issues that impact people of difference. But *Pulse* also led me to inquire deeply, personally, into queer leadership in the writing center field, alongside but also far beyond the work of peer writing tutoring. My orientations to queer writing center research and attention to these events make this book what it is: a study of what queer writing center directors say about their administrative labor; a study about their labor’s implications for what we, in the writing center field, talk about when we talk about writing center administration; and a discussion of how, because it’s through a queer lens, this study aligns and departs from current conversations about writing center administrative labor.

FORWARD DIRECTIONS

Following the *Pulse* murders and their impact on my center and tutors, I have sought to understand relationships between queer identities and administrative posts, especially the evoked work that takes place when queer people take on writing center directorships, as well as the disciplinary implications of that work alongside and beyond lore and hearsay. However, lore and hearsay are quite loud in the broader discipline: for example, in a conversation at a recent International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Conference, two other queer writing center directors and I spoke about our work lives. Just that week, I had helped a transgender tutor navigate their coming-out process to other tutors and had felt pushback during a staff meeting in which I noted writing centers could house social justice missions. My comments sparked head nods from both colleagues. One had just been asked to serve on a campus-climate committee to offer a queer voice. Another colleague, having recently left one administrative post for another, confided how being bullied at his previous institution—namely being called homophobic slurs—impacted his ability to lead his center and support his tutors; being bullied and responding to such treatment, he said, was its own kind of work. In wrapping up our conversation, we noted that queer-led writing centers signal distinct labor and commented, somewhat in

jest, that many nonqueer writing center colleagues often disregard such claims as mere lore, countering and drowning queer stories with their own less relevant straight ones. At the same conference, I heard similar sentiments to my colleagues' and mine echoed at the special interest group for LGBTQA writing center practitioners.

In this sense, *Queerly Centered: LGBTQA Writing Center Directors Navigate the Workplace* speaks to writing center administrative labor and queer identity at a key moment in Western culture's history in which queer people face concurrent progression, regression, oppression, and violence (as articulated in the previous and next section), and whereby attention to and equity and access for minorities at work is critical. Such a book is kairotic given that writing center research seeks to examine the realities of its work and workers alongside a complicated queer local and global zeitgeist—one relatively absent from book-length writing center studies.

To echo Nicole Caswell, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, and Rebecca Jackson (2016) in *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors*, this study is “about a job” (3) but specifically examines what labor looks like when queer people direct writing centers, especially what local and disciplinary phenomena surface alongside queer writing center leadership. This framework informs *Queerly Centered's* central research questions, grounded in interviews with twenty queer writing center directors: What makes up the labor and lived, on-the-job experiences of these writing center administrators? What might accounts and analyses of such queer labor teach writing center administrators about writing center work, especially as it interplays with capital, activism, and tension on the job?

Such questions give way to how these twenty queer writing center practitioners teach us, as a discipline, about administrative labor. Participants' work showcases nuanced, complex labors not yet acknowledged, documented, or investigated formally in the writing center field's research. Queer labor is linked (1) to participants' queer backgrounds (what chapter 2 calls *capital*) that inform their capacities for writing center work in the first place; (2) to activism and its implications for participants' sites, bodies, tutors, students, and the discipline; and (3) to site-based, interpersonal, and disciplinary tensions (which often take the form of bullying and mobbing) that surface in connection with participants' queer bodies. While the study draws from the wisdom of queer laborers, this is, first and foremost, a book about writing center administration; it is for writing center practitioners of all orientations, queer and nonqueer alike. Writing center directors identify as LGBTQA

more frequently than national averages (Valles, Babcock, and Jackson 2017), and while many of the book's arguments surround issues of queer communities, I have written with the intention of speaking at once to queer and nonqueer audiences about writing center work. Ultimately, this book offers practitioners a heuristic for understanding and complicating work, for seeing a nuanced queer vision for it, and for seeing themselves in this book regardless of their sexuality.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Research about queer identity and writing center administration is timely in that the Western political landscape is complexly nuanced for queer people—unprecedentedly progressive yet codedly and explicitly oppressive and violent. On one hand, a June 2013 Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) decision on *United States v. Windsor* overturned the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) of 1996, while a June 2015 SCOTUS ruling on *Obergefell v. Hodges* extended marriage equality nationally. Such instances are not insignificant, certainly for those who remember the passing of DOMA or who experienced the legal limbo of same-sex partnerships between 2013 and 2015. On the other hand, queer people who do not enjoy privileged access feel the impact of local and national injustices, such as queer and transgender homelessness in historically queer neighborhoods; queer and transgender suicide in urban and rural centers; erasure of queer and transgender people of color from legislative activism at local and national levels; and the national attention resulting from many mandates, such as Houston's Equal Rights Ordinance, that seek to protect queer people from discriminatory practices but that are often met with phobia, contestation, and controversy. The weight of violence toward queer people is especially heavy as well, as the *Pulse* shooting and regular queer and transgender murders point to.

In November 2016, the presidential election complicated such a landscape for queer people. Despite the former executive administration's lip service to business as usual for queers and marriage equality, the then-president, on more than one occasion, Tweeted transphobic statements, some directed at active military and veteran transgender people (Trump 2017). And yet, on May 31, 2019, one day before the start of World Pride month, Trump tweeted,

As we celebrate LGBT Pride Month and recognize the outstanding contributions LGBT people have made to our great Nation, let us also stand in solidarity with the many LGBT people who live in dozens of countries

worldwide that punish, imprison, or even execute individuals . . . on the basis of their sexual orientation. (2019)

Trump’s prideful back pat isn’t entirely unwarranted: at face value, the United States is not a country that explicitly imprisons or executes queer people. Yet, this administration’s executive orders and closest appointees did much harm to queer people, which extended into Trump’s 2020 homophobic and transphobic sentiments and actions that mirrored those of his early presidency: people of his ilk propel forward a narrow definition of religious freedom at the expense of queer people and care little for addressing, or even acknowledging, everyday oppressions that impact queer and transgender people, such as work-based discrimination. When I started writing this book, a queer person could be fired from a job for being LGBTQA in forty-eight of fifty states. Allowing a glimmer of queer hope, however, the SCOTUS recently heard *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia*, and *Altitude Express, Inc. v. Zarda and R. G. & G. R. Harris Funeral Homes v. EEOC* to make decisions about federal work protections for LGBTQA people. Despite a conservatively packed SCOTUS with recent Trump justice appointees, the court ruled six to three that the sex-based workplace discrimination applies to gay, lesbian, and transgender workers, thus making on-the-job discrimination against gay, lesbian, and transgender people unconstitutional (Totenberg 2020).

DEFINING LABOR BEYOND AND WITHIN WRITING CENTERS

Work and *labor*—two words used interchangeably throughout this book—are about our professions, our day and night⁴ jobs, and our production. In his work on burnout in rhetoric and composition, James Daniel (2020) identifies distinctions between work and labor, arguing that “labor is associated with production” while “work names the conditions and locations of labor.” These distinctions are important yet difficult to parse out alongside the complexities of participant stories about their writing center leadership, which informs my rhetorical decision to use the words somewhat interchangeably throughout this book. In this book, *work* and *labor* are what these queer writing center administrators do *for a living*, as we might say in Western culture, in order to signal the oft-recognized relationship between performing labor and being a worker within an industry for the purposes of capital exchange and personal and professional livelihood. Arguably, industrialist and capitalist economies gave rise to our present definitions of work and identity, informing modern conceptions of, for example, *emotional labor* and *gig*

economy that span industries. One would only need to scan the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to see the words *work* or *labor* operationalized and contextualized alongside any number of professional issues, from adjunct and contingent labor to identity, justice, equity, and access in universities.

Journalism and more popularized media do not shy away from such embodied conversations: Barbara Ehrenreich's (2001, 2005) research showcases early intersections of work, class, access, and privilege of Western, modern labor forces, while David Shipler's (2004) *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* won a Pulitzer Prize, signaling scholarly and journalistic focuses on work, access, and the people who are laboring. As Western culture advances into late capitalism—or the chaos comprising global work lives that surfaces from the violence of capitalism, taken up and popularized from Ernest Mandel's 1975 *Late Capitalism*—we, as global citizens, see the realities of labor landscapes, sometimes exciting, sometimes bleak, a vacillating theme that arises in this book.

Work and labor surface in Arlie Hochschild's (1979) critical sociological research. Hochschild showcases the gendered work of flight attendants, work not included in their official job descriptions but that is a no less laborious form of capital exchange, whether it is smiling or keeping customers happy while in flight. From that study, she argues that work and workers labor far beyond documented job duties, as this book argues. Alongside Hochschild, this book's labor definitions, by default, align with social sciences research grounded in *visible* and *invisible labor* (Daniels 1987; Crain, Poster, and Cherry 2016). Drawing from these theorists, I define *visible labor* as nameable, countable, measurable, and translatable to a job description for which a laborer is compensated and evaluated, whereas *invisible labor* accounts for work not often associated with, understood, or recognized as explicitly generating capital for an institution but that capitalizes on the emotional and embodied work of its laborers. This labor, however invisible, however emotional, and however unaccounted for does indeed propel forward institutions, often at workers' emotional and embodied expense. Such labor definitions inform the double-edged sword of this book's queer workers' often invisible and sometimes visible work. On one hand, this book's chapters teach us these directors are primed for and are the best advocates for carrying out particular kinds of writing center labor. For example, many participants note a likelihood that tutors and students alike will look to them for mental- and sexual-health support and advice. These directors' writing centers often act as queer de facto sites for medical- and sexual-health support when other university resources fail to materialize. Such labors are often gratifying but also occasionally trying for participants, as

articulated in later chapters. Despite its tensions, no participant would entirely forego such invisible labors, minus the bullying, but it is worth mentioning that this work falls with intensity on these queer practitioners. Difficulty arises in the fact that such work is also difficult to name, categorize, and document for professional advancement and disciplinary participation and forward movement.

Grutsch McKinney's (2013) *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers* opening recounts the familiar forms of work writing center directorships entail, whether writing, reading, researching, mentoring, consulting, advocating, scheduling, tutoring, meeting, talking, or worrying (1–2). Directors lead their sites and develop, implement, and assess their missions. They teach tutoring courses. They manage budgets and payroll. They tutor and help tutors tutor. They manage conflict. They listen, they talk, and they mentor. This book's participants do this work, yet their labor also departs distinctly from what we, in the writing center world, talk about when we talk about writing center work: participant work extends beyond the field's researched parameters when, for example, a queer writing center director is the first to hear about a queer tutor's suicidal ideation, or when a tutor comes out as gay, transgender, or polyamorous and seeks a queer director's immediate support. Or when the queer writing center director is the "go-to" person for all things queer on campus, like students' experiences with sexual assault or tutors' fears about the Trump administration's impact on queer and transgender communities. Or when participant Jeremy tells me our writing centers are not merely sites where queer activism may happen but are spaces uniquely and queerly conducive to such endeavors, especially through tutor-training courses and empirical research. Or when it is up to participant Madeline to make the case to a workshop participant that conversations about gender-neutral pronouns matter to writing center work.

In this sense, participants certainly do work that translates to recent writing center administrative-labor research, especially emotional and everyday and disciplinary labor (Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, and Jackson 2016, 23–27) or everyday and intellectual labor (Geller and Denny 2013). These researchers define labor as work that represents practitioners' job descriptions, their scholarly participation and production, and their mediation and resolution within interpersonal professional contexts (Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, and Jackson 2016, 27; Geller and Denny 2013). Yet, I depart somewhat from Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, and Jackson's (2016) definitions for their participants' "emotional labor," or "work that involves care, mentoring, or nurturing of others; work of building and sustaining relationships; work to resolve conflicts;

managing our display of emotion” (27). I find significant value in Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, and Jackson’s study and in how they name participant work. But I hesitate to call my book’s participants’ work “emotional labor.” This is not to say the participant labor isn’t without emotional impact, nor that it departs completely from Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, and Jackson’s definitions.

Rather than completely adopt this term—*emotional labor*—I prefer to extend forward these recently defined labor taxonomies, for emotional labor is not easily delineated from other forms of labor (everyday or disciplinary), nor does the term account for the labor of merely living in a queer body as a writing center administrator, given the national landscapes described earlier in this book’s introduction. As this book delves into in later chapters, *emotional labor* as a descriptor does not neatly help some queer participants make sense of on-the-job violence inflicted upon them. For example, as theorized in chapter 4, some participants’ most laborious work stems from being bullied. The bullying, its consequences, and its participant responses, whether through pushback or silence, are not merely consequential offshoots of the work but work itself that interfaces and complicates participants’ official job duties. Facing and working alongside colleagues who, for example, have called you a “fag” is its own kind of labor. To do one’s work alongside such landscapes, among many other examples outlined in later chapters framed in *capital*, *activism*, and *tension*, is also such a labor—an invisible labor—that we in the writing center field have not explicitly addressed in scholarship, except on occasion at our national venues, which by and large, and by definition, are exclusive sites.

WRITING CENTER ADMINISTRATIVE WORK AND QUEER IDENTITY: A RESEARCH GLIMPSE

Labor discussions intersect with higher education and, by extension, writing center administration. In this regard, any writing center administrator experiences a host of day-in-the-life interactions that shed light on the current political sphere. The quotidian instances—good, bad, ugly—of our writing centers are never too distant from the zeitgeist of the national landscape (Denny 2010, 2011, 2014; Denny et al. 2019; Hallman Martini and Webster 2017b). In essence, what happens in the world at large also happens to us as professionals. This dynamic is especially true for queer writing center administrators who may navigate a landscape, both on the job and in the world, wherein progression, regression, and oppression exist simultaneously. On the job, queer

professionals may exercise rights in naming same-sex spouses in work-related documents and protocol, like medical insurance, next-of-kin status, and tax dependency but still may feel the emotional weight of lived experiences in leading writing centers and bridging and living professional and personal lives. Take, for instance, the queer director who overhears homophobic or transphobic hate speech in the center; the gay job candidate who meets raised eyebrows after mentioning a same-sex spouse during a research talk; the trans administrator who fears material repercussions of merely existing on campus and using public facilities, no matter how Leftist the institution may seem; the queer administrator of color who experiences coded racism in departmental meetings while also facing a landscape where gender identity and sexual orientation don't exist in their university's diversity policies or nondiscrimination language. As this book argues in later chapters, such landscapes not only impact queer work but also create circumstances that are, in fact, work.

Work and Labor Research and/in Writing Centers

As of late, labor surfaces as a critical research area in writing center studies. The field's recent award-winning text and a key inspiration for this book, *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors*, mentioned earlier, examines case studies and extensive interviews with nine new professionals directing writing centers (Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, and Jackson 2016). In it, the authors offer specific labor definitions that speak to the state of twenty-first-century writing center work. The work—"everyday," "disciplinary," and "emotional" labor—refers to that of job descriptions, independent and collaborative scholarship and research, and the "care, mentoring, or nurturing of others" (27). This rich study stems from a tradition, often grounded in survey-based and theoretical pieces, that traces who writing center directors are and what they do (Balester and McDonald 2001; Crisp 2000; Elliott 1990; Fels et al. 2016; Healy 1995; Ianetta et al. 2006; Isaacs and Knight 2014; Lerner 2006; Mattison 2011; Valles, Babcock, and Jackson 2017), alongside key national surveys that trace administrator backgrounds nationally, among other data (National Census of Writing n.d.; Writing Centers Research Project n.d.).

The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors (2016) aligns with another recent award-winning, labor-focused text no less critical to this book, "Of Ladybugs, Low Status, and Loving the Job: Writing Center Professionals Navigating Their Careers," with the latter study focused on thirteen interviews about work with writing center directors who attended or were affiliated with the 2005 IWCA SI. In it, Anne Ellen Geller and Harry Denny (2013), similar to Caswell, Grutsch McKinney,

and Jackson (2016), trace writing center director work, focusing on how forms of labor—“intellectual” and “everyday” (102–4)—impact the establishment and sustainability of writing center directors’ research production, which, both studies claim, is made difficult because of laborious administrative conditions that take precedence over academic production—a reality with individual and collective disciplinary implications. Both studies allude to chasms in their data, noting that work could very well be complicated by participant subjectivity. In fact, *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* (Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, and Jackson 2016) concludes with the “unsaid” of participant work, especially that “[the researchers] expected would enter [their] conversations,” like “gender, race, sexuality, religion, (dis)abilities, marital or family status, or social class” (180) but which participants did not share or note as relevant. For the researchers, such identity-based omissions on the part of new writing center directors point to the occasion: the researchers themselves didn’t ask, but participants may have withheld this information intentionally, assuming it irrelevant to work, perceiving it outside the research scope, or other such factors (180). These participant omissions are unsurprising, as such conversations are not often on the radar of disciplinary research despite writing center directors identifying as LGBTQA more frequently than national averages (Valles, Babcock, and Jackson 2017), as stated earlier.

LGBTQA Issues and/in Writing Centers

Framed explicitly in queer and sexuality studies among other intersectional tenets, a fall 2017 *Peer Review* special issue, “Writing Centers as Brave/r Spaces” (Hallman Martini and Webster 2017b), showcases empirical, theoretical, and narrative works, arguing that writing centers exist, conflict, and thrive within the current political landscape. The collection itself holds the most writing center-focused collection of queer pieces in one place, with four articles that deal explicitly with queer bodies, orientations, and studies for writing center work (Dixon 2017; Faison and Trevino 2017; Hermann 2017; McNamee and Miley 2017). Yet, queer subjectivity and writing center work are still underexamined and undertheorized in writing center research.

In fact, a key critical glimpse into the intersection of queer and writing center studies, Andrew Rihn and Jay Sloan’s (2013) “Rainbows in the Past Were Gay: LGBTQIA in the WC,” argues that queer research “relating to sexual identity” in writing centers is quite sparse, especially given emphasis on writing center investigation into “structural inequalities” framed in other identity markers such as “sex, race, class, and

dis/ability” (1). I depart slightly with Rihn and Sloan’s claim in that I don’t necessarily agree that these latter subjectivities are given adequate attention in writing center scholarship. Yet, I agree with their expression of both “pride and disappointment” (1): pride in what queer or LGBTQA writing center research does exist alongside disappointment because of a lack of investigation into queer issues and bodies in writing center research as a whole. Even their piece that traces silence, heteronormativity, and erasure across writing center research identifies rich queer writing center content and also reveals a scarcity of explicit queer research specific to writing centers. Which is not to say queer issues are not part of the conversation alongside and since Rihn and Sloan’s (2013) discussions, in that Michele Eodice (2010), Jonathan Doucette (2011), Rexford Rose (2016), and Jonathan J. Rylander (2017) critically examine queer theories and writing center praxis, specifically in regard to writing center spaces and tutoring practices. Further, Jay Sloan himself authored the writing center field’s earliest LGBTQA scholarship about writing tutoring (1997, 2003, 2004).

Front and center in Rihn and Sloan’s (2013) examination is Harry Denny’s (2005, 2011, 2013) work. Signaling the affordances of operationalizing queer theory in writing center spaces, Denny (2005) suggests such a framework is critical to writing center work. But it is, perhaps, Denny’s (2011) book-length theoretical study, *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring*, that acts as the writing center field’s primary text about a spectrum of intersectionalities related to writing center work. In it, he positions centers—one-on-one peer tutoring in particular—as sites always already about identity and intersectionality. Denny frames the text in his “epiphany—that identity politics are real and uncharted in writing centers” (4), rightly and beautifully articulating that “a day doesn’t go by that somebody [in a writing center] doesn’t contend with the dilemma of assimilating, going with the flow, or challenging the well-worn path” (16). These three frameworks guide his discussions through writing centers and issues of gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, and nationality. While Denny (2011) delves into various subjectivities, his gender and sex chapter makes way for such conversations in the first place, arguably for the first time in writing center studies, alongside rhetoric and composition research framed in sexual literacies and writing practices (Alexander 2008). Yet, *Facing the Center* (2011) is not necessarily empirically framed in queer bodies that inhabit writing center spaces but is more situated in queer, queered, and queering orientations to the assimilationist and subversive potential of writing center work within institutions of higher education.

A recent sister text to *Facing the Center*, *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles* (Denny et al. 2019), an edited collection, marks intersectional, autoethnographic voices coalesced to make concrete many of the theoretical underpinnings of *Facing the Center*. Whereas *Facing the Center* (2011) theorizes from one scholarly vantage point, *Out in the Center* (2019) showcases writing center voices of myriad identity intersections around issues of public discourse and writing center work. These two texts' foundations in postmodern writing center work are certainly grounded in Nancy Grimm's (1999) *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, which inspired writing center texts similar in sentiment, such as *Noise from the Center* (Boquet 2002), *The Everyday Writing Center* (Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, and Boquet 2007), *Writing Centers and the New Racism* (Greenfield and Rowan 2011), *The Writing Center as Cultural and Interdisciplinary Contact Zone* (Monty 2016), and *Radical Writing Center Practice* (Greenfield 2019). Aligned with such conversations, *Queerly Centered* also seeks to contribute to the disciplinary lineage that understands and positions writing center work and sites beyond tutoring.

This book delves into racial dynamics, as two participants are of color and many are intersectionally embodied in their queerness (e.g., queer *and* black; queer *and* female; queer *and* transgender; queer *and* gender nonconforming). In this sense, this book is in conversation with such recent works as Riddick and Hooker's (2019) *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal's* special issue "Race in the Writing Center," Romeo Garcia's (2017) "Unmaking Gringo Centers," and Neisha-Anne Green's (2018) influential *Writing Center Journal* article calling for accompliceship over alliance. In fact, Green's call to action around "word and deed" (29) inspires this book's directions for communication with both queer and nonqueer audiences in that accompliceship within raced, homophobic, and transphobic landscapes is of utmost importance for this book. Said another way, Green, when calling white colleagues to action on behalf of writing center practitioners of color, argues that white people being supposed allies to people of color isn't enough. She sees disparity between what people say and what they do. In this sense, she calls for an accompliceship of *doing* the work of supporting and advocating for colleagues of color in national and disciplinary landscapes that are often on a sliding scale between untoward to violent. In the spirit of this conversation, Garcia (2017) points out that the writing center field must complicate its raced understandings beyond Black-White dynamics, which ultimately erases writing center stakeholders with diversely and intersectionally raced bodies. Such conversations mirror those present in the work of

Vershawn Anthony Young's (2011), Anne Geller, Frankie Condon, and Meg Carroll's (2011), and several scholars' race-focused scholarship in Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan's collection, *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change* (2011), as well as the antiracism work of Wonderful Faison, Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison, Katie Levin, Elijah Simmons, Jasmine Kar Tang, and Keli Tucker (2019) that stems from IWCA antiracism missions.

Rhetoric and composition subfields have empirical and theoretical roots in labor and queer, raced, or intersectional personhood as well. In the technical communication field, Matthew B. Cox (2019) examines how queer corporate workers navigate and name the public and private in their professional lives. Staci Perryman-Clark and Collin Lamott Craig's (2019a) *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration: From Margins to the Center* offers a collection of Black voices that call for intersectional intra- and intercoalition building for writing studies administrators (i.e., workers) within writing program administration and rhetoric and composition. Genevieve Garcia de Mueller and Iris Ruiz (2016) and Sandra Tarabochia (2016, 2017) engage with person-based research about university faculty to bring raced and gendered perspectives to writing program administration and writing across the curriculum. And the writing program administration world has, indeed, delved into queer identity, queer work, and queer issues (Alexander 2009; Alexander and Banks 2009; Banks 2012; Denny 2013; Kopelson 2013; Pauliny 2011; Rhodes 2010) through studies that examine queer administrative positionality, queering of the WPA discipline and statements, and queer subversions through administration while not necessarily offering empirically driven studies, as this book does.

LABOR, CONTINGENCY, AND IDENTITY WITH- IN AND BEYOND WRITING CENTERS

Contingency in writing centers and higher education, while not this book's focal point, does intersect with its research framework. Dawn Fels, Clint Gardener, Maggie Herb, and Liliana Naydan (2016), for example, conduct qualitative, person-based research on contingent (i.e., non-tenure-track) writing center directors' labor, tracing the broader impact of such labor on the writing center field, including its workers and its stakeholders. Discussions of contingency are not too far from issues of retention and sustainability—two secondary themes of this book—especially as we, in both the writing center and rhetoric and composition fields, consider and act on behalf of the long-term sustainability

of our writing sites, our research, and our place within higher education. As such, higher education practitioners regularly question higher education's long-term sustainability, anticipating its eventual collapse per our lack of critical, proactive, and progressive orientation to work and workers. It is a tumultuous landscape where workers and work are subject to and punished by neoliberal institutions of late capitalism. Rhetoric and composition studies of the past decade, especially those published during or after the 2008 American stock-market crash, speak to conversations of contingency (Bousquet 2008; Carter 2008; Kahn, Lalicker, and Lynch-Binieck 2017; Strickland 2011). This project does deal explicitly with a sister conversation about contingency (i.e., worker retention) related to the invisible, intensive labor of queer writing center directors and its long-term impact on workers, work, and universities. Which is to say this book, while focused on writing centers, may help practitioners navigate the rhetoric and composition world's contingency research and is marginally in conversation with work such as Fels et al.'s (2016) research.

METHODS

With a 2016 International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Research Grant, I conducted twenty interviews, following Institutional Review Board approval from my previous institution. Semistructured interviews based on eight open-ended questions⁵ ranged from approximately thirty minutes to an hour and a half, with broad questions focused on participant perspectives about queer identity and writing center administration. I first invited queer writing center practitioners who were "out" either through their research or site missions and who held full-time administrative or faculty roles at collegiate writing centers, but I recruited a majority through snowball sampling and the 2016 and 2017 IWCA conferences. I recorded interviews with my personal phone and my MacBook's Garage Band application. Using the recordings, I took notes on each interview, logging notable selections and writing short vignettes about each participant. I later had the interviews professionally transcribed, coding those transcriptions using NVivo10 for MAC. I ran data queries on NVivo to identify emerging data patterns, first relying on participants' oft-used and notable key words or phrases. Using words and phrases, I coded the transcripts for participants' descriptions and discussions of and reactions to work they did as their site's lead administrator.

This book showcases twenty queer voices across the nation across many institutions and subject positions. Among these voices were many complementary threads that arose from coding and analysis. I do not intend,

however, to argue that these data are so generalizable as to capture the work experiences of any and all queer writing center directors. Yet I do think this book's emergent theories can still teach practitioners about writing center administrative labor. In this sense, this project is empirical, qualitative, and, perhaps, somewhat replicable, aggregable, and data driven (RAD). In some ways, RAD is a fabulous lens for conducting writing center research. In other ways, I believe it poses problems with regard to identity ethics for both researchers and participants. From a RAD lens, my methods are replicable, and I do hope they could offer a lens for other queer, transgender, and raced projects. However, I caution against just any researcher replicating my methods and instruments given that my queer body played a critical role in the development and framework for the project, including and especially linked to recruitment and establishing trust with my participants. In this sense, I rely on Alexandria Lockett's (2019) guidance from her qualitative work with Black writing center stakeholders. In her chapter in *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*, "A Touching Place: Womanist Approaches to the Center," she cautions against an overreliance on RAD methodologies, arguing that RAD "tends to strip the human experience of its nuance and may risk diminishing the various ways we might interpret experience as data" (33). Lockett draws from Neil Simpkins and Virginia Schwarz (2015), who do believe RAD methods can be effectively, productively, and queerly queered, but begin their now-landmark writing center blog post, "Queering RAD in Writing Center Studies," with concerns about how queer and transgender bodies, ontologies, and ideologies may be uncomplimentary to RAD methods, which often don't account for the fluid nature of person-based research. This study's methods rest on these researchers' claims in that I don't believe RAD methods are the best lens for a book about queer working bodies and stories. Further, as Lockett (2019) suggests, I don't believe generalizability is possible, nor the point, when so few queer empirical writing center studies exist in the first place (a claim she makes about the dearth of writing center scholarship focused on Black writing center stakeholders). Despite this RAD critique, I do, however, feel an empirical, qualitative glimpse into these voices offers these queer perspectives a disciplinary credibility of sorts. It is worth a mention here that much of what exists about the conversations of this book exists primarily in field lore (i.e., in listserv conversations, in bar conversations at conferences, and in LGBTQA special-interest groups at conferences). While lore isn't a bad thing necessarily, an empirical glimpse through coded data about queer writing center work and workers may actually better

support and showcase the labor and laborers of this book, moving such conversations out of listserv conversations, conference bars, and special-interest groups and into published writing center scholarship—and, more importantly, into our centers and the broader field.

Participants

This book's participants identify as gay, lesbian, transgender, and queer across intersections of race, class, gender, and background. I interviewed only writing center directors, assistant directors, coordinators, and professionals who hold nongraduate student leadership status in writing centers (i.e., I did not interview graduate students or graduate assistants who work in writing centers). Participants hail from varied institution types, whether research extensive, regional comprehensive, community college, small or large private, or secondary education and hold diverse institutional roles, whether tenure stream, tenured, or full-time administrative.

This book, as evidenced in table 0.1 below, showcases the voices of ten participants who are male identifying and gay; nine who are female identifying and lesbian or queer; and one who is transgender/female-to-male and opposite-sex oriented. Despite a lack of gender and racial diversity in the writing center world, I was able to recruit participants across male- and female-identifying participants. Sarah Banschbach Valles, Rebecca Day Babcock, and Karen Keaton Jackson (2017) reveal, from 313 survey responses about national writing center demographics, that 91.3 percent of participants were white, 71.5 percent female, and 28.5 percent male—percentages that reflect the field's few studies. I point to Valles, Babcock and Keaton's project to note a lack of diversity, showing that, despite the writing center world being homogenous across race and gender (i.e., made up of mostly white, straight, female practitioners), this book does offer some diversity of voice.

With this said, even with snowball sampling and my own active recruitment at conferences special interest groups, I was not able to diversify my pool enough to get more than one transgender voice. Yet, while just one participant identifies as transgender, other participants do identify themselves or their practices as gender nonconforming—a gender expression that refuses traditional conceptions and performances of norms associated with being male and being female in Western culture. And, despite a typical “sea of white” participant Matt describes in the lobby of his first IWCA conference and that pervades the writing center field, I did recruit two gay men of color. I asked both for support in snowball sampling. Both were open to doing so, but struggled

to name other queer people of color who direct writing centers. As is, this study includes just these two voices of color, though neither are women of color (I speak more about this limitation in this book's conclusion). Similarly, I attempted to consciously avoid bisexual and asexual erasure—common forms of erasure in the LGBTQA community—but was not able to recruit participants who identified explicitly as bisexual or asexual, though many participants spoke about stories, experiences, or contexts that alluded to bisexuality and asexuality.

All participants noted no problem with their names being used in this project, as most align with the mantra that the personal is the political (and further, the professional and the administrative). However, participants hold varied relationships to current and past institutions and myriad position types, with some positions more secure than others. For these reasons, I yielded to giving pseudonyms in that participants may not always hold the same stances about anonymity given prospective professional and personal changes that may arise later.

Table 0.1 doesn't do justice to participant voices. For that reason, their voices frame the next chapters, which name, analyze, and situate their queer work.

ANALYSIS

I relied on rhetoric and composition's feminist rhetorical research practices and methodologies about uncovering and showcasing voices yet unheard in published scholarship (Royster and Kirsch 2012). I did my best to listen to and for these queer voices. I was able to do so, in part, because of my queer body attuned to exclusions in broader Western cultures, which is to say that what's erased in culture writ large may also mirror exclusions in the profession, despite the writing center world's mostly queer-friendly orientations to research and praxis. The voices and lenses of this project are not only unheard but are often silenced with the word *lore*, a well-intentioned word that makes its way into writing center research methods as of late. I myself do not take issue with the idea of disciplinary "lore" in the ways accounts of recent writing center research about methods have⁶ (Driscoll and Perdue 2012). Because of my cultural rhetorics training at Michigan State University, I find stories help researchers both frame and extrapolate theory. I would go so far as to say, as cultural rhetorics scholars long have said (Bratta and Powell 2016; Brooks-Gillies 2018; Powell et al. 2014), that stories are, in fact, theory.

When working with and writing about transgender voices, I used G Patterson's (2019) theoretical, ethical frameworks for analysis and

Table 0.1. Participant Demographics

<i>Name</i>	<i>Identification</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Region</i>
Adam	Gay	Male identifying	White	Part-time administrator & adjunct faculty	Community college	Northeast
Amanda	Queer	Female identifying	White	Staff administrator & adjunct faculty	Community college	Midwest
Dana	Queer	Gender nonconforming	White	Staff administrator	Research	Northeast
Brian	Gay	Male identifying	Black	Tenured faculty administrator	Regional comprehensive	North/Midwest
Casey	Pansexual	Female identifying	White	Pretenure faculty administrator	Private	Southeast
Cara	Lesbian	Female identifying	White	Non-tenure-track faculty administrator and instructional faculty	Research	North/Midwest
David	Gay	Male identifying	White	Tenured faculty administrator	Community college	North/Midwest
Jack	Transgender	Male identifying	White	Staff administrator & adjunct faculty	Private	Midwest
James	Gay	Male identifying	Black	Staff administrator	Community college	North
Jennifer	Lesbian	Female identifying	White	Staff administrator	Regional comprehensive	Northeast
Jeremy	Gay	Male identifying	White	Pretenure faculty administrator	Regional comprehensive	North
John	Gay	Male identifying	White	Tenured faculty administrator	Research	Southeast
Katherine	Lesbian	Female identifying	White	Staff administrator and instructional faculty	Research	North/Midwest
Leah	Lesbian	Female identifying	White	Staff administrator and adjunct faculty	Research	North
Madeline	Lesbian	Female identifying	White	Tenured faculty administrator	Research	South
Matt	Gay	Male identifying	White	Part-time faculty administrator	Secondary education	North

continued on next page

Table 0.1—*continued*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Identification</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Region</i>
Mike	Gay	Male identifying	White	Tenured faculty administrator	Research	North/Midwest
Ryan	Gay	Male identifying	White	Staff administrator & non-TT faculty	Research	Northeast
Stephanie	Lesbian	Gender nonconforming	White	Staff administrator & adjunct faculty	Regional comprehensive	South
Tim	Gay	Male identifying	White	Tenured faculty administrator	Regional comprehensive	North/Midwest

composition. Patterson (2019), a transgender rhetoric and composition researcher, calls cisgender scholars to abandon “performative allyship,” to direct their privileged bodies instead to acting as “co-conspirators,” understanding that allyship is mere lip service given the oppressive and violent global landscapes for transgender people. In other words, only collective conspiring against such landscapes is beneficial to and saves transgender people from material harm. From this methodological approach, Patterson offers several ethical parameters that ought to be engaged when and before cisgender people write about transgender people. Their call includes owning one’s cisgender privilege, enacting transgender reciprocity, exhibiting transcultural competency, and “amplifying” trans voices, first and foremost (Patterson 2019). In aligning my writing-based and analytic frameworks with Patterson’s rightful and apt call, I first name my cisgender privilege here, as I am a gay, white, cisgender male whose lived experiences offer me privilege as well as a distinct departure from what transgender people live and face in their daily lives, especially their professional lives—this book’s guiding landscape. I have done my best to “amplify” the critical voice of Jack, the book’s transgender participant, in order to propel forward writing center research, which has not yet showcased trans voices with rigor. I hope this project and others that follow it might change that scholarly landscape, which is how I think about reciprocity with transgender scholars in writing centers, especially Jack. In interviewing and writing about him, I have also used his preferred pronouns (i.e., he, him, and his), in order to write transcompetently on his behalf, as Patterson (2019) suggests.

Similarly, in working alongside, drawing from, and writing about queer Black voices, I write with attention to Eric Darnell Prichard's (2019) guest blog post on Carmen Kynard's "Education, Liberation, and Black Radical Traditions from the Twenty-First Century" blog. In it, Prichard calls attention to Black queer femme and female erasure in rhetoric and composition, referring first to the 2019 distribution of a *Literacy in Composition Studies* call for papers (CFP) that was pulled, revised, and redistributed because of its Black erasure and trans-exclusionarity in framework and citations. Prichard (2019) notes that despite revisions to the CFP, it still glaringly excludes several rhetoric and composition women of color and queer people of color. Mindful of Prichard's (2019) concerns and frustrations, I write this book with attention to ethically showcasing and writing about the Black queers in this study and also commit to citing and recognizing Black queer scholarship. A tension, however, examined throughout this book is that writing center scholarship has not adequately delved into race in writing centers; in fact, race is often superficially examined in writing center studies, as Romeo Garcia (2017) so richly argues in his investigation into Mexican American writing center frameworks that complicate the field's attention to Black-White dichotomies. Thus, in adding to commitment, I have sought to be an accomplice (Green 2018; Patterson 2019) to Black (and transgender) voices through this book in addressing what's just not there in writing center research, as many participants relay.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The previous section's chart includes participants' self-identifications, which span the LGBTQA identity spectrum. Throughout this book, however, I use *queer* as an interchangeable stand-in for LGBTQA. I am aware personally and professionally that the word *queer* holds distinct histories and meanings that do not always align with Western culture's LGBTQA acronym. With this said, *queer* on the page is more readable than *LGBTQA*. Further, I use the words *director*, *administrator*, *practitioner*, and *professional* rather interchangeably in this book to describe people who officially lead writing centers. Because the book is about how leaders lead, I worried about using just one signifier, simply because of readability and repetition. For example, I didn't want the word *director* to be in every third sentence, hence my reliance on other similar terms. I realize the field has taken up this administrative distinction (Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, and Jackson 2016; Geller and Denny 2013) and encourages scholars to be intentional when referring to our writing center work, as

I have done my best to be. Further, *work* and *labor* are used somewhat interchangeably through this book, despite historical and etymological nuances of each term discussed earlier in this chapter.

BOOK ARC AND CHAPTER SUMMARIES

This book's chapters offer a narrative arc that rests and draws upon participant voices. Each chapter begins with historical vignettes that introduce and connect to chapter themes and that showcase participants beyond this introduction's participant chart. Its three analytic chapters begin with how participants first oriented to their writing center work (what chapter 2 calls "capital," "origins," and "readiness") in order to situate participant histories. Using these histories for further labor discussions (chapter 2, in fact, argues that participant capital, origins, and readiness are their own form of labor), chapter 3 examines and analyzes how participants are drawn and led, if not pressured, to respond to local, national, and disciplinary calls for writing center activism; it is their capital and histories that sometimes led them to this work in the first place. The chapter explicitly examines the work of these practitioners and its personal, political, and disciplinary impact on participants, their sites, and the writing center field. Discussions of activism lead to chapter 4, which focuses on how participants experience tensions, especially bullying, in their positions.

Chapter 2: Queer Writing Center Labor and/as Capital

Chapter 2 examines the origins and histories of how queer participants come to know, understand, and labor in their writing center administrative positions. Participants discuss relationships among their former or current lives as activists, teachers, organizers, and myriad careers grounded in their queer identities. One participant recalls being prepared for writing center work long before he entered the field by his work with people as an early AIDS-era community organizer—a role, he claims, mirrors the work of a writing center practitioner (i.e., working with people "where they are" and supporting their long-term sexual education as a big-picture learning process). Other participants note leadership and experiences in organizations and sites—such as the Girl Scouts of America and growing up gay in the South—that queerly inform their pedagogical approaches and give way to later administrative understandings, what the chapter calls *capital*. Participants name and exhibit a rhetorical readiness for writing center administrative work. The readiness itself calls forth Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) and R. Mark

Hall's (2010) definitions and applications of cultural and social capital, through which I examine how queer practitioners draw from queer lives to make sense of, navigate, survive, and thrive within writing centers as people of difference, often respected yet sometimes feared in their institutions of higher education.

Chapter 3: Queer Writing Center Labor and/as Activism

Extending the writing center field's engagements with writing centers as sites of activism and bravery, chapter 3 analyzes how participants articulate, enact, respond to, and feel about how their professional identities and sites interface with forms of activism, whether locally, globally, or globally. Writing centers as sites of activism and civic engagement pervade current disciplinary conversations—from peer-reviewed research (Denny 2011; Green 2018; Hallman Martini and Webster 2017b; Ozias and Godbee 2011) to quotidian listserv conversations. Such conversations imply that writing centers ought, in the first place, to uphold and sustain justice-focused orientations and that the writing center field's few diverse leaders ought to lead such activism on- and off-site from their writing centers. The chapter analyzes the perspectives of labor and activism as they play out in the lives of queer administrators of varied ranks, institutions, backgrounds, and orientations given that all twenty participants allude to, comment on, or expound upon it. Participants report myriad experiences ranging from supporting tutors and writers with politically driven documents, arguments, and processes to helping writing center and university communities cope with major events, like Orlando's 2016 *Pulse* nightclub shooting of queer people, the account of which opened this book. Such instances offer participants professional moments of resolve that, they report, contribute to a greater good. Queer writing center administrators may revel in such activist orientations to writing center administration, but it is no less a form of distinct, nuanced, and often invisible labor than is emotional labor, which has been outlined by nonqueer colleagues in past and recent writing center administrative literature. Without collective sharing of such labor across institutions and disciplines, the writing center field's articulated values may be unsustainable and unattainable. Further, the work of writing center activism and advocacy often falls on some of the field's most vulnerable. From an activist standpoint, I argue that a social justice orientation to writing center work is not the rhetorical and administrative responsibility of only administrators of difference and diversity. Given that many participants, especially queer participants of color and trans participants, discuss the glaring absence of queer, trans, and POC voices

and projects in writing center studies, I further suggest that accompliceship (Green 2018) is a critical method for thinking about and moving writing center studies and research forward. The “sea of white and straight” (i.e., how one participant describes the annual writing center flagship conference) may not offer a sustainable landscape and may directly contradict values the writing center discipline claims to hold in its recent research and organizational discussions.

Chapter 4: Queer Writing Center Labor and/as Tension

Linked to distinct labor and to the guise of the progressive and queer-friendly field of higher education, chapter 4 discusses and analyzes moments of tension, violence, and oppression that stem from participants’ queer and administrative identities, arguing that tense instances distinctly impact work. In fact, the instances lead to forms of work themselves. Many participants still experience bullying, mobbing, micro-aggressions, and aggressions, even in seemingly progressive academe and even after acting as queer activist leaders who mentor and impact their institutional communities beyond their job descriptions. Such conversations about queer oppression are still necessary, despite disciplinary stories of progress and assumptions of Left-leaning institutions and colleagues. While many participants discuss pairing their identity and their administration for varied forms of activism and advocacy, one participant, for example, reports being called the “fag professor,” describing a culture of mobbing and bullying that impact his ability to mentor students and run his writing center to the best of his abilities. Another participant’s supervisor mentions she cannot “technically” fire the participant for being a lesbian but does not assuage the participant’s fears of termination or advocate for the participant to lead the center without fear of being out. This chapter does not simply seek to report complaints or oppressions but frames these perspectives within broader discussions of labor and administration in writing center administration.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

As a closing framework, I provide directive calls to action for writing center practitioners of all orientations—queer and nonqueer alike—to revisit and apply the study’s central research questions. I also propel forward strategies for intentional recruitment and retention of queer administrators in the writing center world and for sustaining the discipline’s proclaimed values, missions, and visions. The book closes with a cautionary but hopeful discussion about the long-term sustainability of writing centers as sites, methods, and practices. In closing, I also offer

conversations about what nonqueer writing center practitioners might do with this book, as the book is, indeed, queerly focused. I frame these conversations in writing program administration, writing across the curriculum, and higher education studies in order to situate this book—one primarily about writing centers—in broader fields.