

Writing Centers ‘Coming Out’: Diversity Statements as Queer Performance

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George Floyd’s murder by a white Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020, fueled a national outcry and sparked Black Lives Matter protests across the nation. In response, many composition programs and writing centers “came out” to address racial disparity. Located in Floyd’s hometown of Houston, Rice University grappled with both the national climate and its own problematic racial history as a whites-only institution until 1963.¹ The Program in Writing and Communication (PWC) at Rice released a statement that “condemns racism in all its overt and covert forms, including both the current and historical acts of racism, discrimination, and violence perpetuated in this country against the Black community and other peoples of color.”² As part of the PWC, the Center for Academic and Professional Communication (CAPC) now contended with how the center fit into the larger discussion of diversity at the university. In what ways are we supporting diverse initiatives? How are we representative of the university community at large?



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As a queer writing center administrator, I consciously facilitate conversations between consultants and staff on various social justice issues; however, it became apparent in such discussions that we needed a concrete diversity statement for our center. Diversity and inclusion initiatives were implicit rather than explicit. In general, many writing centers lack a visible diversity statement or bury it within a single line of a mission statement. As a discipline, we have become better at sharing personal identity-driven narratives, but backing them up with pedagogy-informed changes is more difficult. At my own center, we decided to craft a diversity statement to affirm our center’s commitment to providing an inclusive, welcoming space for all students. In the process of crafting such a statement, we discovered that diversity statements shaped the cultural identity of our center, informing our ideology, training, and hiring practices.

While “coming out” typically refers to the process of acknowledging and/or publicly disclosing one’s sexual or gender identity, I use this term to emphasize the anxiety of public disclosure that surrounds self-identification more generally. Psychologists Susan McCarn and Ruth Fassinger identify four major phases of the “coming out” process: (1) Awareness, (2) Exploration, (3) Deepening/Commitment, and (4) Internalization/Synthesis.³ LGBTQ+ individuals begin to recognize how they differ from heterosexual norms (awareness). They explore same-sex feelings and seek out information about queer communities (exploration). Greater self-awareness and identification with

LGBTQ+ groups develop (deepening/commitment). Finally, the person integrates their LGBTQ+ identity with other identity factors (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, etc.) into a holistic sense of self (internalization/synthesis).

Diversity statements constitute a “coming out” because they require (and cause) vulnerability. For LGBTQ+ people, “coming out” is an emotional process, often coupled with anxiety, depression, and fear of rejection. Self-identifying opens oneself up to critique and potential harm. Similarly, choosing to self-identify as a writing center that positions diversity, equity, and inclusion as central values also creates a sense of vulnerability, especially for those centers whose ideologies do not conform to the surrounding institutional or community contexts. Faculty and administrative reactions should be considered during the diversity statement development process. Coordinating with university stakeholders before choosing to publicly share a diversity statement to a wide audience, such as on a university-sponsored website, can help to establish wider institutional support and mitigate potential harm.

Explicitly employing a diversity statement can also be seen as “coming out” in that it serves as a form of performative identity. Jonathan Alexander and Michelle Gibson write that queer pedagogy asks us “to acknowledge that identity is a performance and that, as such, it can change from day to day, hour to hour, or moment to moment” (7). These everyday performances, largely established through language and non-verbal communication, construct our sense of self in relation to the world around us. The identity of our centers is also fluid, adapting to institutional changes, population demographics, and even new forms of communication. I view forming diversity statements as an act of “coming out” in that they require an acknowledgement of this fluidity and a recognition of the role that individual identities play in communicative practices. As a form of authoritative speech, diversity statement discourse has the power to put into action those initiatives and goals that it names. Judith Butler states that performative acts include “statements that not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed” (17). Reclaiming “performance” in the sense that Butler uses it draws attention to the ability of discourse to enact change and its power to reshape the environment around us.

I offer McCarn and Fassinger’s “coming out” model, along with practical examples from my own center, as a framework for (re)imagining the diversity statement composition process as a form of queer, performative discourse. This framework provides unique insights into the identity formation that happens when writing centers choose to make diversity, equity, and inclusion explicit governing ideals central to their missions and identity. Viewing the diversity statement as an act of “coming out” can empower writing centers not only to explicitly commit to their stated values but also to actively shape those values into performative action.

PHASE 1: AWARENESS

In the first phase of the “coming out” process, an awareness of “difference” from heterosexual norms begins to develop, and “nonconscious ideologies become conscious” (McCarn and Fassinger 522). This phase may also induce feelings of

“confusion and bewilderment” (524). During this phase, a greater consciousness of people with other sexual orientations also develops, and previously held assumptions are called into question. Within a writing center context, diversity statement development begins with an increased awareness of peoples who inhabit the center’s spaces—not just LGBTQ+ individuals but also those who differ in terms of race, disability, and other identity markers. Acknowledging such diversity can lead to recognizing the need for such a statement. There may also be a sense of fear or anxiety about how to approach issues of diversity or how to connect with diverse students on a meaningful level.

Often, writing centers are politicized queer spaces—spaces in-between the cracks of the university system, inhabiting the fringes both physically and ideologically. Invoking this sense of queerness, Harry Denny calls writing centers “liminal zones, transitory arenas always both privileged and illegitimate” (97), while Andrew Rihn and Jay Sloan discuss them as operating in “contested, interstitial territory between macro-level social structures and micro-level interpersonal communication” (8). In the center, identities collide, blend, and occasionally conflict with one another. During consultations, students draw from various facets of their identity (gender, sexuality, race, class, religion, etc.) each time they *perform* the work of a consultant.

Writing centers are defined by people, namely students, consultants, and administrators, who occupy their spaces. In composing diversity statements, we are asked to write, rewrite, and reimagine our center’s missions, goals, and initiatives. Given the incredibly difficult nature of defining and quantifying the important work of our centers, the act of self-identification is critical. As Stacy Waite asserts, in considering “all structures or guidelines as normative, we might miss the queer possibilities of structure itself” (87). The benefit of self-identifying within a familiar institutional genre, like diversity statements, is that it allows for opportunities to queer the system from within and communicate more effectively with students, faculty, higher administration officials, and the wider community.

PHASE 2: EXPLORATION

The second phase involves actively examining the questions concerning identity proposed in the first phase. For a queer individual, this may mean “exploration of sexual feelings” and positioning oneself “in relation to a reference group along two dimensions: attitudes and membership” (McCarn and Fassinger 522, 524). Exploration, in other words, involves actively interrogating one’s own positionality. For writing centers, this means considering commitments, values, and attitudes. This means shifting your focus from how you view your own center (awareness) to how you want others to view it (exploration).

To understand how your writing center is positioned in relation to diverse peoples, you need input from queer voices. By referring to “queer voices,” I don’t mean only LGBTQ+ people, but all minorities that inhabit the academic margins. *Diversity initiatives require diverse perspectives*. Input from disenfranchised individuals, such as LGBTQ+ and BIPOC students, can provide important feedback on the climate of the center and make it a

more democratic, equitable process. Internal stakeholders, such as writing center directors and administrators, tutors, and other student staff, should also be included in the conversation. External stakeholders outside the center's immediate circle, such as WPAs, provosts, or other allied university members, may also have additional input or resources to help progress diversity initiatives.

To explore our own commitments and values at the CAPC, I facilitated an all-staff activity in which more than 25 consultants participated in the early stages of the diversity statement drafting process. In groups of four, we asked them to critically reflect on our current program climate (where we are now), the ethical responsibilities of the center (what we *should* be doing), and suggestions for improvement (where do we go from here). Using Google Docs, each group recorded notes on the key takeaways from their discussion. We used three guiding questions:

1. Do you consider the center a diverse, safe space? Does the center feel representative of the wider community? Why or why not?
2. What are the center's responsibilities regarding diversity and inclusion? Consider all facets of the center at both the consulting and the administrative level.
3. Is there anything else that the center should consider implementing to make it a more inclusive space?

Several overlapping themes emerged from these small group discussions. While most groups viewed the center as a racially and culturally diverse space relative to the university, several groups noted the need for more STEM-based majors among consultants to better represent the Rice student body. Many groups acknowledged academic writing as a potentially "exclusionary by its nature" and the "danger of gatekeeping particular writing habits," especially regarding English Language Learners. In relation to this, consultants also expressed the need for "training on narrative voice, emphasizing that not all writing should look the same—to hear and empower more voices in writing." Finally, consultants agreed that we needed a workshop on working with diverse students incorporated into our two-day consultant orientation.

PHASE 3: DEEPENING/COMMITMENT

The third phase leads to deeper understanding about oneself and the "crystallization of some choices about sexuality" (McCarn and Fassinger 522). As a person deepens their commitment to the reference group, they are likely to experience "ideological and emotional transformation" (525). "Coming out" allows a sense of freedom in which we can compose, rework, and (re)assemble a version of ourselves into something new. In a way, this is like synthesizing unique voices in a diversity statement. In the act of writing a diversity statement, our ideological vision of our centers begins to take shape, drawing on others' ideas of what centers are and can be. We mold an image of ourselves in relation to others—a social contract between the center and the students we serve.

In this third phase of the diversity statement drafting process, we built on the group discussions from phase two by having each student group collaboratively draft a concise (2-4 sentence) diversity statement. We then compiled all the statements into one

document, and then bolded and highlighted key words and phrases. Consultant statements emphasized diversity in racial and cultural background, as well as respecting diverse voices in all forms of communication. Every statement also focused on issues of hiring practices and ongoing professional development. Incorporating key concerns and language from consultants, along with input from full-time staff, we composed a cohesive diversity statement:

The CAPC is committed to providing an equitable learning environment and responding to the diverse communication needs of all Rice community members. The CAPC also values all backgrounds and voices in academic and professional communication; we respect all writers' linguistic backgrounds/preferences, as well as differences in culture, race, ethnicity, economic status, disability, religion, gender, sexuality, and academic discipline. To this end, our staff receive ongoing diversity and social justice training, and we also strive toward building a staff that is representative of the larger Rice population that we serve.

There is no "one-size-fits all" when it comes to diversity statements, but they do share a common set of rhetorical moves. The statement begins with a strong, clear statement committing to equity and diversity. Next, the statement lays out specific values; in this case, emphasizing backgrounds and voice in academic and professional communication, linguistic differences, and valuing all aspects of individual identity. Finally, the end of the statement highlights specific goals and initiatives: to offer ongoing diversity and social justice training and to engage in equitable hiring practices to create a diverse student staff. Of course, diversity statements will vary based on a center's individual context. They may include commitments/values, goals, initiatives, campus resources, internal support programs, or even relevant data on population demographics. Overall, a diversity statement should include a strong commitment to equity and diversity, highlight specific values and principles, and identify initiatives to reach your diversity goals.

Effective diversity statements are accessible to a wider audience. This means maintaining a professional, academic tone while also embracing queer voices and language that supports actionable change. Most diversity statements are relatively short (75-100 words) and can be easily read by students, faculty, and administrators. These statements should also be visible and publicly available. They can be displayed on a writing center website, the subheading of an annual report, departmental newsletters, job postings/descriptions, social media feeds and other marketing, or they can be physically posted in the center. In my own center, our diversity statement has been posted on our website, social media, and on a digital display in our physical space. Increasing visibility signals to students that their identities are valued and respected in these spaces.

PHASE 4: INTERNALIZATION/SYNTHESIS

The final phase, according to McCarn and Fassinger, involves self-acceptance and identification as a member of a minority group. Synthesis may be identified with a greater sense of security and feelings of fulfillment, as well as becoming "socially aware" of one's own oppression (525). In the context of composing a diversity statement, we

might view this internalization as a move from ideology to action. Queer performance doesn't stop with self-identification and visibility. All social justice work must be active, not passive. Frankie Condon calls for "Moving beyond an ethics of good intentions to an ethics of responsibility" (31). When properly implemented, diversity statements can serve as the bridge between articulating and acting on those writing center values. In her 2017 IWCA Keynote, Neisha-Anne Green gives the charge to "Stop being an ally; instead be an accomplice" (29). A difference exists between "safety-pin rhetoric," as Green so aptly calls it, and discourse that influences meaningful change (29). Performing the diversity statement requires re-examining who is welcome in our spaces and how we include minority voices in the decision-making processes of our centers.

At my own center, we are building on the foundation that we constructed with our diversity statement by developing diversity training in orientation for our consultants, creating new professional development training on identity-driven topics, and working on providing more transparency on diversity initiatives. At the larger writing program level, we are implementing a DEI pedagogy committee to enhance faculty training on equitable writing and communication practices and starting a list of DEI-oriented communication pedagogy resources that we can share across the university. The process is continually ongoing as institutional and cultural contexts change and evolve, but the need for implementing meaningful change is constant.

Using queer theory as a framework for conceptualizing how we can view diversity in our centers and for crafting diversity statements is only the first step. As bell hooks states, "To create a culturally diverse academy we must commit ourselves fully" (33). Committing ourselves fully means continually reassessing, reimagining, and reconstructing our center's values. Viewing diversity statements through the framework of "coming out" allows us to reflect on our values, embrace the liminal identities of our students and centers, and perform actionable change. Diversity statements are living documents. These statements should be periodically revisited and revised to incorporate feedback from assessments (both internal and external) and climate surveys. More than anything, these statements need to reflect actionable change for students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and for all other "queer" bodies left on the academic margins.

NOTES

1. In recognition of this problematic history, students and faculty formed The Task Force on Slavery, Segregation, and Racial Injustice in June 2019.
2. The full statement can be viewed on the Program in Writing and Communication (PWC) website: pwc.rice.edu.
3. Several theoretical models for "coming out" exist. While the phases are similar between models, McCarn and Fassinger (1996) differentiate between personal development and group membership, which may or may not develop simultaneously.

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