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## **Expanding Your Boundary: Improving Writing Services to LGBTQ+ and Black Students through Satellite Locations**

Erika Nelson

Asking for writing help is already hard. There is a vulnerability in letting someone else read your writing. You open yourself up to potential critique. You could fear being judged for your writing style or content. While we tutors do our best to mitigate those fears, there are a multitude of emotional and intellectual barriers that prevent people from seeking writing help. However, there are some groups of students who have additional barriers, based on their racial or sexual/gender identities. In addition to emotional barriers many students face, students with minoritized identities also need to be concerned about discrimination when they ask for help. A non-binary student might be worried about a tutor using their correct pronouns. A Black student might be worried about being the only person of color in the center. But what can writing centers do to decrease those barriers and serve minority students? Part of the answer is to take the help to the students through satellite locations.

The 2020 Southeastern Writing Center Association conference theme was “Growing Our Centers.” Growth can mean any number of things, but this work falls under the category of growing the student population you serve. However, in this instance growth is not just in terms of numbers and outreach. Certainly, it is important that writing centers work to reach as many students as possible, both for our own benefit and for our students. But true growth is about understanding the institutional and social structures at play which prevent certain populations of students from seeking our services. This type of growth involves an exploration into the perceptions of your space and systemic inequalities that minority students face.

This paper is a further exploration of my presentation at the SWCA conference titled “Expanding Your Boundary: Improving Services to LGBTQ+ Students.” In the presentation, I discussed the ways that a satellite location at the LGBTQ+ identity office on campus allowed greater engagement with queer students at Vanderbilt University. This paper expands upon that research by exploring the Writing Studio satellite location at the Black Cultural Center as well as the LGBTQ+ Life Center. (This work could easily translate to different minority communities. The reason this paper is limited to queer and Black students is simply the presence of these two identity offices on Vanderbilt’s campus.) Using internal consultation data, a survey given to students from both centers, and secondary literature relating to minority students and higher education, I argue that satellite locations are an effective way to grow your client populations to better include Black and queer students.

### **Why is consideration of these communities necessary?**

To understand the need for specific consideration of students with minoritized identities, the first thing one must understand is minority stress. Minority students face increased stress on college campuses, and that stress negatively affects academic performance. This is discussed in the scholarship as “minority stress.” In their work on the experiences of minority students on college campuses, Jones, Castellano, and Cole posit “that a minority status bestows an additional burden of stress on ethnic minority students,” and is “associated with an increased risk for negative outcomes beyond that which is attributable to the stresses of being a student at a highly competitive academic institution” (Jones et al. 23). Although this paper dealt with ethnic minority students specifically, there is similar stress on queer students. All minority students combat macroaggressions, harassment, and class content which don’t speak to their life experience. This minority stress affects all areas of a student’s campus life, but most relevant to writing centers is the negative effect on their academic performance, which happens for a variety of reasons: professors who are not understanding (or, worse, are outright racist or homophobic), a smaller support network of peers from their identity group, or the feeling of responsibility to represent their minority group in all areas on campus. Minority stress is not only something that writing center staff need to be aware of when tutoring these students; it carries further implications regarding the use of writing services.

One such implication is a reluctance on the part of minority students to seek academic support services due to insular social grouping. Black and queer students form tight-knit communities based on their identity groups. Jones, Castello, and Cole argue that these groups are essential for minority students because they are an important way to combat minority stress (Jones et al. 20). However, an outcome of that insular community is the reluctance to look outside one's community for help. When other areas of the university are potentially harmful or prejudiced, it reduces minority stress to stay inside one's community. This means that if your writing center does not have a direct connection to the Black or queer communities, you are foreign and outside. You are not part of a minoritized student's community network. Therefore, students are less likely to make that first trip because the center is an unknown entity. This reluctance does not mean that your writing center is racist or homophobic, it just means that the student has to take the time to confirm that it is not. That places the onus on the student to confirm their safety and comfort, where it should be on the writing center.

You may be asking if a student's safety and comfort are really at risk. Harry Denny, in his seminal work "Queering the Writing Center" explores the ways that minoritized students in a university setting are constantly combatting the way that their bodies are read by others. Every part of their university experience is impacted by other people's assumptions. Denny writes that Black and queer students "are marked by social cleaving," and their "bodies speak before spoken (Denny 55). What he means is that people make assumptions about Black and queer bodies whenever they enter a space. Before the student even has a chance to speak, they must work against the way that society has made their body speak for them. Thus when entering a writing studio, a student who does not appear to conform to a gender cannot just work on their writing, they must combat the way that tutors or staff inevitably attempt to sort them into "acceptable" categories of gender. When a Black student comes into the writing studio, they have to work against the ways that a tutor might make assumptions about their education level or language use. Denny states it succinctly when he says that these students "must always occupy a calculated relation to public space," (Denny 54). The writing center is a public space on campus. There minoritized students come into the space already straddled with the burden of society's expectations or assumptions of their identities.

While Denny articulates the theory behind queer and black students' marginalization, he does not speak about the real-life way it manifests in student's everyday experiences. For this, I turned to Roberta Nelson (they/them), the Assistant Director of the Office of LGBTQI+ Life at Vanderbilt. In an interview with Nelson, they said that queer students specifically have a reluctance to seek new places that is rooted in a deep fear of trauma related to their names and pronouns. These students get into strict campus routines; they know where they are safe and they don't stray from those places (Nelson). There is fear associated with new places, especially those which require appointments. This is because queer students cannot be assured of proper pronoun or name use. For example, a trans man could make an appointment at the writing center, but due to many university policies his name could appear to be female. This is called a deadname, meaning the name of a trans person prior to transition. (I encourage you to seek out the policy at your university regarding the ease of changing one's name. Often, students are only allowed to use their legal name, and in many states it is nigh impossible for trans students to legally change their name.) Nelson could not overstate the trauma of being deadnamed for trans people. Additionally, non-binary people will automatically feel deeply uncomfortable if gender-neutral pronouns are not frequently used in your space. That is a difficult thing to know unless the student ventures into your space. This first exploratory visit sets them up for potential trauma and thus does not often happen. It is easy to see how trans and non-binary students would be reluctant to seek services where they are unsure if their name will be respected.

What all of this adds up to is a negative perception of the writing center as a stressful or unsafe place. This doesn't mean that our spaces are inherently harmful, especially if we've taken the necessary steps to educate our tutors about minority issues and are intentional about hiring a diverse staff. But, we must still recognize that the barriers minority students face in university life mean that they might never even walk through our doors. Minority stress means that students face greater academic stress across campus. The attempt to combat that stress leads to insular communities which are hesitant to seek outside sources of help. When they do seek outside sources of help, minoritized students must deal with the way that public spaces make assumptions about them before they can even speak for themselves. Finally, for queer students

specifically, the importance of names and pronouns in a space means that unknown places have the potential for trauma. Writing center professionals need to be aware of how students perceive their space in order to truly grow their student population. To truly serve more students we need to think about which students are not coming in the door, and why. The overall outcome of all of these factors is that unless we go to them, Black and queer students may be unlikely to come to us.

However, operating under the construct of true growth, we need to be familiar with systems embedded in the fabric of the center which prevent these groups from truly being themselves, even if they do come in the door. Harry Denny discusses the ways that “writing centers are places overflowing with structural binaries,” and among these he mentions white/people of color and gay/straight (Denny 41). He argues that a negotiation of these binaries is constantly happening in writing consultations. As with more commonly understood binaries, like expert/novice or professional/peer, this negotiation often leads to one identity being privileged over the other. This is not an overt process, but that is part of what makes it so difficult to root out. While Denny does not articulate satellite locations as a potential solution to this problem, it fits with his ideology. Satellite locations at identity centers disrupt those binaries by uplifting the identity that is often passed over or ignored.

## **Why are satellite locations the best solution to these problems?**

As minority students form routines and insular social groups, the identity center is the locus of their experiences. Identity centers serve as the physical manifestation of the minority subgroup. These centers are not merely places for social interaction, they play a crucial role in the academic development of minority students. In their work on the minority student social behavior, Wong and Nagasawa state that:

[Minority student] subculture serves as a subunit or enclave to reduce the social and physical size of the campus. It also serves as a support system that helps sustain students in college. Hence, if the subculture provides a suitable niche or enclave on campus and helps its members meet the social and academic demands of college, then it will enhance the survival of its members. That is, the degree and

quality of contact with other members of the subculture are critical for success in college. (Nagasawa and Wong 82)

In other words, when students can be with other students who share their identity, they are more likely to succeed in a wide array of college situations. As the physical place on campus where these subgroups gather, identity centers are the hub of minority student success. These centers become the physical “niche or enclave” in which minority students gather and share community.

Not only is the identity center a space of comfort and community, it is a place to unlearn harmful messages. As minority students face harassment and stereotyping in other parts of the university, the identity center becomes a place to heal and decompress after facing the rest of the campus. Therefore, Yosso and Benavides Lopez discuss the identity center as a “counterspace,” especially in a PWI (Yosso and Benavides Lopez 84). These centers foster positive identity development, often in direct contrast to messages that students receive in other places on campus. The idea of counterspace is especially important when considering true growth. When reaching for true growth we must be aware of the systemic inequalities that minority students face. The concept of counterspace helps frame the campus experience of minority students. It shows how the university at large is a place of potential and actual harm. The identity center becomes the safety net that minority students can count on when they want to escape that harmful environment.

So, if identity centers are the counterspace where students feel safe and supported, it only follows that those spaces are where we must go to offer writing help. Students will be more likely to come into those spaces because they are sure they will be accepted and comfortable. They are also more likely to have productive educational experiences because of the comfort of their environment. Although I will address the bulk of the survey data later, a student quote is useful here. When asked if they would feel more comfortable going to the main location or the LGBTQI+ Life location (which is called the K.C. Potter Center or KCPC), one student said the “KCPC...I honestly just feel better and more at home there. Because I feel more comfortable, I’m able to get a bit more work done.” Many other students expressed this sentiment as well. If we know that minority students are more comfortable in identity centers, and thus are able to focus more productively on their academic work, that means

a writing tutor needs to be present in these spaces in order to truly cater to these students.

Furthermore, understanding writing center work in this way not only helps the students, but changes the writing studio itself to become more open and collaborative. Nancy Grimm, in her chapter in *Writing Centers and the New Racism* speaks of the ways that writing centers can become closed-circuit communities and end up reifying “stratification, disconnectedness, dogmatism, narcissism, marginality, factionalism, and imperialism,” (Grimm 91). Without actively reaching out to different communities, writing centers risk the trap of continually self-affirming discourse which, as Grimm notes, has disastrous consequences if gone uncorrected. Therefore if writing centers understood themselves “as places where the academic community actively recruits new members, welcomes the creativity of those with multi-memberships, and studies the reconciliation work that occurs on the boundaries of communities, then their scope of practice and their function within the university changes in significant ways,” (Grimm 91). These words ultimately speak to the power of diverse voices in creating more accurate, powerful, and relevant academic discourse within writing centers. Opening satellite locations in identity offices is a perfect way to “actively recruit new members” into the writing center community. Satellite locations show minoritized students that their voices are not only heard, but that they are absolutely crucial to the discourse of the writing center.

For our own writing center practice at Vanderbilt, the rationale for starting satellite locations was fairly simple. The assistant director of the Black Cultural Center (BCC) reached out to the Writing Studio director in June of 2018. The BCC had recently launched a resource room in their center and hoping the Writing Studio would offer academic support in the space. Bradley agreed for many reasons: the usefulness of drop-in hours in a space which is already frequented by students, the mutual benefit for both the Writing Studio and the BCC, and the high competition for appointments at the main location. Ultimately, our director saw the partnership with the BCC as an opportunity to show recognition of and support for Black students on campus. The decision was not based on hard data, but rather an overarching understanding (on the part of the both the BCC and the Writing Studio) that support for Black students on Vanderbilt’s campus was not as robust as it needed to be.

The KCPC program came about less than a year later, for similar reasons. In Fall of 2018, I was an excited incoming graduate consultant. As I learned about the place of the Writing Studio on campus, I began to wonder why there was a satellite location at the BCC and not at the KCPC. As a queer person myself, I knew all too well the ways that queer students often fell through the cracks of university academic support. Knowing the BCC program was so successful, I approached my director to ask for a similar satellite location at the KCPC. I wanted to show the queer students on campus that the Writing Studio was a place for them. I wanted them to see that the Writing Studio staff recognized the struggles they go through when entering a new place on campus. Having seen both the need for and success of the BCC satellite, our director immediately agreed. Thus our satellite program grew out of an understanding of the broad ways which academic support on campus privileges white and straight students. Our center understood that the onus was on us, as a center, to show that we were a place for Black and queer students. The way we did that was by going to them, rather than asking them to come to us.

## **Satellite Location Data from Vanderbilt’s Writing Studio**

The LGBTQI+ Life satellite on Vanderbilt’s campus, despite the fact that it is a young program, has been highly successful at growing our student population. The program has been active for three semesters and consists of two hours a week. The appointments are primarily walk-ins, but the option to make an appointment ahead of time is available on WC Online. Combining the data for the first two semesters, 37.5% of appointments were with new clients. Such a high rate of new clients, especially considering the naturally lower numbers of appointments at the satellite location, shows how effective the program was in terms of catering to new students. And not only did we serve new students, but we created a space where non-binary students specifically felt more welcome and sought our services at a higher rate. More than 12% of appointments were with clients who used they/them pronouns, whereas at the main location only 0.48% of appointment were with students who used non-binary pronouns. While this isn’t a direct comparison due to the significantly larger number of appointments at the main location, the

numbers still show that non-binary or genderqueer students feel more comfortable seeking writing help at the satellite location.

Additionally, this program grew significantly over time. The number of clients at the satellite almost doubled from the first to the second semester. This is important to note, both because it shows the success of the program but also because it serves as a caution for any centers who wish to engage in this work. The first semester might not seem successful; we only had just under 10 appointments. But once the students in the identity center became more familiar with the tutor and the services provided, that number dramatically increased, and only continues to do so. So, if your writing center successfully starts a satellite location, then I encourage patience. This is a long-term investment in the success of minority students. For the reasons noted above, many of these students will be hesitant to trust new people. But once they do, the program will grow in productive and important ways.

Another key point in our program at Vanderbilt is that the tutor at LGBTQI+ Life was both a member of the queer community and was trained by the staff at the center. It might not always be possible to have a queer tutor, especially if you have a small center, but the training is of key importance. The training I received, as the tutor of the space, covered the norms of the center (most importantly to not disclose publicly who uses the center), use and understanding of diverse pronouns, and some of the issues faced by the LGBTQI+ students at Vanderbilt specifically. This training will presumably look different depending on the situation at different universities, but it is important that the tutors receive some kind of training in order to best cater to the students.

The satellite at the Black Cultural Center is equally successful, but regrettably we have less data on that center due to the different structure of appointments. Working with the BCC, our office determined that hours offered at the BCC should not be available on WC Online. A sign-up for the available hours is circulated via the BCC listserv. This is in order to preserve the appointments as spaces for Black students, and not as merely another writing center location open to all. Due to this, we have different data regarding this satellite. But we can still see the ways that the program has grown. The number of appointments offered increased due to demand. For the 2018-2019 year, only five appointments were offered. During Fall 2019, that number increased to

seven. It decreased to six in Spring 2020, but that was accompanied by an overall decrease in the number of appointments in the spring on our campus. Overall in the 2019-2020 year, 93 appointments were made. Finally the qualitative post-session comments were all positive and spoke to comfort and an allaying of anxieties. What both of these satellite locations at Vanderbilt show us is that the administrative configuration can vary drastically. There is no “one size fits all” approach. But regardless of the way the appointments are carried out, students utilized the program and found it highly useful.

## **Survey Results from BCC and LGBTQ+ Life Students**

In order to capture more student input regarding the effectiveness of these centers, I circulated a survey to both the students of the Black Cultural Center and the LGBTQI+ Life Center. This quick survey asked students their comfort levels going to both the main location and the satellite location at their identity center, using a Likert scale of 1-7. 1 correlated to “very uncomfortable” and 7 to “very comfortable.” The survey also asked how their experiences have been at the satellite location, if they had gone. Finally, it asked overall which location the students would be more likely to go to in the future. The survey circulated among the students of the BCC received 57 responses and the LGBTQI+ Life survey received 49. These surveys were circulated by the listservs maintained by both offices and asked students to participate regardless of whether they had visited the Writing Studio.

Overall, the data show that students preferred the satellite locations for their writing studio appointments. If needed, they would go to the main locations (for scheduling reasons for example), but given the option, the majority of students would choose their identity office for writing tutoring. One survey question asked students to choose which location they preferred. For the queer students, 50% of respondents were more likely to visit the KCPC location, 36% the main, and 14% had no preference. For the Black students, 51% preferred the BCC location, 42% the main, and 7% had no preference. These data, perhaps more than any of the other points, show the need for writing centers to engage diverse student populations at their identity centers. Students are simply more likely to seek writing help at their identity centers. In terms of comfort level, for the Black students the most frequent answer was 5 out of 7 in terms of student comfort at the main location, whereas it rose to

7 out of 7 for comfort at the BCC. For the KCPC survey, although 7 was the most frequent answer for both locations, the concentration of 7s was higher in terms of comfort at the LGBTQI+ office. Students seemed to be comfortable in both locations, but they would prefer to go to would go to their identity office if they were able. Overall, the statistics do not show a dramatic preference for identity offices, it is clear that the satellite locations provide an important and appreciated service. Moreover, the qualitative reasons that students prefer the satellite locations show the important issues at stake in this work.

The most common reasons that students preferred their identity office is a desire for a tutor who understands the issues faced by their community and a concern that the main location would not offer that. In the KCPC survey two students mentioned that their writing is queer-focused and they expressed worry that at the main location their work would be perceived as “too political.” They felt more comfortable at the KCPC because they knew the tutor would focus on their writing, rather than taking objection to the content. This sentiment was echoed in the BCC survey when one student, who rated increased comfort at the BCC, said “I would feel more comfortable talking to someone who understood that I was approaching the topic from a Black perspective.” Another Black student said that they felt the BCC tutor would be less likely to change their voice. Queer people are often accused of politicizing an issue when it is actually a question of their human rights. Black people are often forced to change their academic voice to sound more white in order to succeed in college. All of these comments show that students expected a deeper understanding of their material from a tutor at the identity center in terms of some of the deep-seated issues both communities face. Keep in mind, the reality of what these students may find at the writing center is not what is in question here. They could very well find understanding tutors at the main location, but the point is that student perceptions of the main location are such that they hinder them from going entirely. Satellite locations at identity centers allay the fears of those students and give them a space to be truly themselves.

Another part of growing your population is being aware of one’s space on campus, and how that space affects people of different identity groups. In the survey, the most common response from both groups was a concern about how far away the main location of the Writing Studio is from main campus. A center’s location can create a number of barriers

for different student populations. Most often people consider differently abled students when speaking of accessibility. Though an important identity group, that student population is not the focus of this piece. The survey revealed how the location was additionally a barrier to access for Black students. Several Black students mentioned not feeling comfortable going to the main location at night because it entailed a long walk across busy streets, and they felt unsafe. Black people constantly need to consider how they will be perceived in a space because of the increased harassment they face from both police and racist civilians. So, walking somewhere at night is something many Black people avoid. The concern is not even the writing center itself but the means by which students arrive at the center. This issue is not one that will always be solved by the satellite office, depending on the layout of your campus. In general, however, identity offices are situated such that students of that identity group will feel safe going there when needed and this is not always the case with the main location of a writing center.

Although it might not sound as important as safety, the idea of comfort is also of key importance because it leads to increased capacity to engage in academic work. The overall feeling of comfort and security was the second most common answer among students of both groups, specifically with the queer students. Four students from the LGBTQI+ Life survey mentioned that they feel secure at the KCPC. These students also discussed the ways that comfort led them to do more schoolwork in the KCPC than in other spaces. The comfortable location and familiar community decreased minority stress. In the other survey, two people mentioned the hominess of the BCC. And several students in both surveys stated that their familiarity with the identity center meant they were more comfortable attending a writing session there. This feeling expressed by students echoes the scholarship of identity center as counterspace. In an identity center, students are able to fully be themselves and escape from the campus culture in a safe and homey environment. As several of the students noted, being more comfortable in one's environment leads to increased ability to focus on schoolwork. This is why, in order to cater better to minority students, writing centers must go where the students are most comfortable.

Ultimately the majority of students prefer their identity office because it is a home for them. One student summed it up well: "I would be more likely to visit the KCPC location because I feel more comfortable and

safe there than anywhere else.” Identity centers are often the hub of a minority student’s campus life. They are most at home there. Therefore, if writing centers are committed to growing the population that they serve, they must meet students where they are. This survey shows that their identity center is the place where we need to meet these students.

## **Conclusion**

Academia privileges white and heteronormative students in countless ways. Writing centers often unknowingly reify that privilege. It is of utmost importance that writing centers become aware of their place in upholding that privilege. They can then be better equipped to combat it. There are many ways we can serve minority students, mostly in the content of our sessions. We can show our clients the white underpinnings of “proper” grammar, be allies for queer students crafting personal statements about their coming out, or countless other examples. But we cannot do that work if minority students do not even walk in our doors.

Satellite locations at identity centers are only one of many ways that we can show minority students that we care. The premise of true growth is exploration of systemic inequalities, not a “one size fits all” solution. I challenge you at your own centers to reach out to campus partners who engage with minority students daily. What challenges do those students face? What type of support would be most helpful for them? Then come up with a plan for how your writing center plays a part in the academic success of minority students on your campus. Truly growing your student population is a process of uncovering student experience, and then doing what you can to make that experience better.

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