

Pandemic Administration, Neurodiversity, and Interrogating Writing Center Accessibility

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Note: This reflection will discuss a traumatic car accident as well as obsessive behavior.

I began to suspect that all was not well when I hit hour four of auditioning rugs for my living room. These weren't real rugs, mind you. They were virtual representations of real rugs that one could theoretically buy. If you are unfamiliar with new technologies of interior design, many home furnishing websites now have this nifty feature where by taking a picture of your living space, you can with impressive verisimilitude place furniture or rugs in your room to see how well they match your existing decor. One by one I rejected each digital rug as too brown, too beige, too grey, too blue. It was not about finding the right rug, really—I absolutely did not *need* a rug—but about manifesting some illusion of control in the face of the uncontrollable. My obsessive-compulsive disorder, like so many other things during the pandemic, had gone virtual.

I have arrangement-oriented obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and I am also a director of a writing center at a mid-sized public institution. There is little disciplinary conversation written from the perspective of a neurodiverse writing center administrator; Karen Moroski-Rigney's important piece "Seeing the Air: Neurodiversity and Writing Center Administration" represents a rare voice here. In "Seeing the Air," Moroski-Rigney discusses broadening conversation about accessibility and writing centers, the intersections between disability and neurodiversity, and her own experiences as an administrator navigating her adult diagnoses of autism and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Importantly, Moroski-Rigney argues that neurodiversity as a writing center administrator can be particularly difficult to navigate due to the field's precarity: "The consistent pressure to maintain funding, staffing, scheduling, training, and research for our centers becomes 'just part of the job.'" Moroski-Rigney continues, "However, disengaging from or questioning this intensive work—or to enlist support in doing it, or to seek ways to do [it] using methods that are healthier for disabled minds or bodies—remains taboo."

I write this reflection in response to Moroski-Rigney's call for more neurodiverse and disabled administrators to publish their own stories. I also hope to push back on what I see as a concerning trend for administrators

to expand exhaustively. I think that we WPAs and writing center directors tend to be a competitive bunch, often by necessity. We compete within our institutions for more resources, recognition, and support, but often our own discipline tacitly encourages rivalry. We vie for jobs, publication opportunities, conference spots, speaking engagements—all tend to reward those who demonstrate innovative resiliency and the ability to “do more with less.” This has felt especially true since the pandemic. My OCD means that I exist with ceaseless and (often) misplaced momentum. At times I rather think our discipline does, too.

MY HISTORY WITH OCD

The Mayo Clinic characterizes OCD as occurring when one experiences “a pattern of unwanted thoughts and fears (obsessions) that lead you to do repetitive behaviors (compulsions).” People with OCD “feel driven to perform compulsive acts to try to ease [their] stress.” Many tend to associate OCD with excessive handwashing, intense germaphobia, or ritualistic counting, and while these are certainly behaviors by and through which OCD can be made visible, my OCD manifests in the need for spaces to be orderly and symmetrical. My therapist hypothesizes (and I am inclined to agree) that my OCD was likely triggered by a combination of genetic predisposition and a traumatic car accident that I witnessed at a young age. I was about six years old, and my dad and I were driving back from my grandmother’s house late at night. We were the first to happen upon a horrific head-on collision, and my dad, a nurse, stopped to help. It is one of those moments that is forever seared into my memory. I was very young and alone in the car on the side of the road, knowing that things were very, very bad. My dad did not tell me explicitly what he saw but the look on his face when he returned to our car was enough.

Witnessing this had a profound effect on my sense of security and I soon developed an unhealthy relationship with arranging my personal space. My ritual would go something like this: stare at my bed, straighten one of the decorative pillows, pull the bedspread tight to make sure there were no wrinkles, walk back to my bedroom door to observe my work, notice that a pillow was crooked or a wrinkle had manifest, walk back to fix it, repeat. I would spend literal hours engaged in this obsessive bed-making and my behavior was always accompanied by intrusive thoughts. *If my bed is not perfect, harm will come to my whole family* repeated over and over as I marched back and forth across my bedroom. It has often been difficult to parse my OCD from the other aspects of my personality, including my tendency toward perfectionism. I am *driven*, it seems, by many innate

forces. I was good about hiding the extent of my obsessive behaviors and my symptoms waxed and waned throughout high school, college, and graduate school, so like Moroski-Rigney, I was not officially diagnosed with OCD until well into adulthood. Generally though, the more company and structure I had, the better I have been able to manage my symptoms.

CONTEXTUALIZING MY WRITING CENTER SPACE

I was first hired to direct a writing center in the fall of 2016, and even before the pandemic, this was a difficult space to inhabit. I have been lucky enough to have the opportunity to write about why it was complex in a few other venues (Botvin and Buck; Buck), so I will not dwell on this extensively here but, in short, I was asked two years into my contract to develop a brand-new writing support center on campus, separate from the one I was originally hired to direct. My mental health was at a low point during this transition. My partner was unable to find a job in the area, so I moved to the region alone. My isolation, coupled with my very difficult labor conditions, contributed to frequent bouts of obsessive behavior. This manifest spatially (e.g., multiple times I completely rearranged my living room furniture at odd hours of the night) and in ways that look a lot like productivity. My tenure requirements necessitated that I write a book or four peer-reviewed articles for promotion; I wrote a book *and* four peer-reviewed articles in two years.

I share all this as a preface to the pandemic because I think my writing center context is important. Already I had internalized the narrative of perpetual progress that tends to characterize administrative labor. Genie N. Giaimo describes how workism is central to much of administration, particularly with regard to the continuous mentorship, training, and professional development initiatives we engage in and the “service work and other work that we do for free as our budgets and support structures shrink.” I sometimes wonder if my OCD drew me to administration specifically because of how this labor validates the inclination to de-prioritize boundaries. For so long, my way of “coping” with my OCD in the absence of therapy or diagnosis had been to dive head-first into anything and everything that could help reroute my propensity toward obsessive behaviors. Administration is a vacuum that will consume all this energy but, critically, my newly-developed writing center pre-pandemic also had more constraints. We had a physical space open from ten to five Monday through Friday. We offered online consultations, but they were far from well-utilized. The center was liberatory in its participatory nature as I had both an assistant director and a graduate assistant who were fantastic, as well as a team of wonderful

tutors. My partner had also finally been able to move to the area. Right at the moment I reached something like stability, everything changed.

NAVIGATING THE PANDEMIC AND RESISTING THE GROWTH NARRATIVE

Like many institutions across the country, in mid-March 2020, our university moved fully online. Several tutors soon began to email me with similar requests. *My hours at my other job have been cut, can I get more tutoring hours at the center?* I made the decision to liquidate our remaining budget to give tutors as many hours as possible, and soon our ten-to-five, mostly face-to-face writing center had abruptly transformed into a 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. fully online writing center open every day of the week to incorporate the tutors' new and suddenly much more flexible schedules. Though I was very ill at the time (with what turned out to be COVID!) our writing center was nevertheless ready to go within forty-eight hours of our university announcing the modality transition. From March 2020 through May 2021, the assistant director and I fielded queries at all hours of the day regarding tech issues, provided support for difficult virtual tutoring situations, and facilitated ongoing tutor training. I was on my computer, in my apartment, nearly all the time.

Moroski-Rigney writes that her quality of life greatly improved when she was sent home to work during the pandemic. She shares, "I have more control over my environment—control I'd never had before. No surprise knocks on my office door. No excess noise or lights. No abrupt changes. No interruption." My response, however, was almost exactly the opposite. I began to fixate on every small detail in our apartment. This is when the rug thing started. Being at home with little division of time or space sent my OCD soaring to new heights. As is often the case, it (un)fortunately took getting to this low point for me to pursue a diagnosis and finally start therapy.

Recent writing center scholarship has tended to focus on how writing centers' compulsory adaptation or expansion of asynchronous and virtual tutoring was ultimately positive. Summarizing this perspective, Barron et al. write that writing center administrators should not be so eager to return to their "cozy" spaces and instead ought to "reflect and learn from our pandemic trials, forced though they were, to evolve and meet the needs of a student body who appear to find themselves increasingly at home in their homes or in alternative spaces." To be clear, I wholeheartedly agree that administrators must be conscious of how to make our centers and practices more accessible to students, especially given the tumult of the past few years. What I argue is equally important: if administrators are going to be

asked to expand in new and innovative ways, attention must be paid to the resources that are needed to make these shifts happen *meaningfully*. This has yet to occur at my writing center. We never returned to a ten-to-five operation; instead, up through last semester, we more or less kept our pandemic schedule as demand for online hours exceeded in-person appointments. We were effectively on call for twelve hours a day. Simultaneously, we lost funding and institutional support for our graduate assistant position, and my fantastic assistant director had his time divided by upper administrators who compelled him soon after our return to campus to coordinate an embedded STEM tutoring program. Our center's resources drastically diminished as we were called to do more and be more.

And yet, I experience tremendous guilt. My obsessions have often felt enabled by my white, privileged positionality and ample time, space, and resources—particularly so during the pandemic. *Here I am fixating on rugs when people are quite literally dying, not just from COVID but from endemic racial and social injustices.* Even though having OCD means that I often experience a heightened response to realities outside of my control, I suspect that I am not alone in feeling intensely and personally responsible for the success or failure of the center or program I direct and the students who work there and use its services. As well-intentioned as recent scholarship about increasing access and modality is, we must also acknowledge that the constant pressure to expand in any and every direction has consequences. What I hope to see in conversation with these calls is concomitant discussion about what would be needed to accomplish these shifts effectively and healthily. For example, many writing centers have vastly increased their online offerings, but I suspect very few have had the means to hire a dedicated online tutoring coordinator. We must say to whatever institutional authority needs to hear it that we cannot accomplish x without y , as much as we might want or need to. For the fall 2023 semester, I have made some difficult, but probably long overdue, cuts to the writing center's schedule. Will students' ability to access tutoring be impacted when we no longer offer synchronous online evening and weekend hours? Absolutely. Can I continue to supervise twelve-hour shifts while also teaching my courses and undertaking research after the provost's office definitively announced that the writing center will receive no additional support or resources? Absolutely not.

If someone were to ask what accommodations I need as an administrator with OCD, it would be to provide me with clear and specific expectations. Boundary-setting is particularly challenging for me, and when my tasks and spaces are liminal and ill-defined, I will assume that everything is my responsibility and mine alone. I surmise others would also benefit

from clarifying similar parameters, but we need our supervisors' and our discipline's support in this. I see many of my wonderful peers lamenting their burnout while simultaneously expanding their speaker series, workshop rosters, research agendas, and more. I ask what it would mean for us to collectively resist this inertia, especially when so many aspects that truly impact the success of our administrative practices—things like our budgets, the perceptions and priorities of campus leadership, and our physical and ideological positionality within institutions—are largely out of our control. I hope a key lesson of the pandemic can be that we more thoughtfully consider what accessibility means, not just vis-à-vis the students we serve but also as applied to ourselves and our labor.

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