

Identity & Practice in Higher Education – Student Affairs

Shaking the Table

Edited by

Stephanie Hernandez Rivera

Jonathan A. McElderry

Survival and Healing
Amongst Identity
Center Practitioners

Foreword by

Jordan Shelby West

Shaking the Table

Identity & Practice in Higher Education - Student Affairs

Series Editors

Pietro A. Sasso and Shelley Price-Williams

Identity and Practice in Higher Education-Student Affairs (IPHESA) is a book series which seeks to interrogate the role of higher education and student affairs administration in shaping college student identity, engagement, and student success. In doing so, the series reaffirms the transformative potential of the college experience to support students themselves in their planning and execution so that they can be real actors in their own learning – one that requires reflection and judgment. The series explores issues of identity and practice to examine how the diversity of college students can experience cocurricular spaces as agents of their own learning. It recognizes that inequities exist across these socially constructed spaces and are experienced differently across college student populations. Book subjects include, but are not limited to, such themes of student affairs within specific institutional types (liberal arts, HBCU, etc.); exploration of specific functional administrative areas (residence life, educational opportunity programs, first-year experience); student conduct administration; student identity development; student mental health; (dis)ability; academic advising or student retention; campus/student spirituality; LGBTQ+ experiences; racial & cultural identity development; student involvement (student organizations, student activities, student unions); and handbooks/guides for student affairs professionals

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Working While Black

Shaking the Table

**Survival and Healing Amongst
Identity Center Practitioners**

Edited by

Stephanie Hernandez Rivera

Elon University, USA

And

Jonathan A. McElderry

Elon University, USA



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ABOUT THE EDITORS

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Using critical cultural methodologies, her research agenda explores how equity and inclusion work is operationalized in higher education; resistance strategies of students, faculty and staff; and how oppressive power systems emerge on micro and meso levels to impact the psychological well-being of communities of Color. Hernandez Rivera's work has been published in the *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education*, and *The Journal of Negro Education* among others. She also serves on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education* reviewing work that engages critical methodologies, women of color feminisms, and intersectionality in education.

Recently identified as an ACPA Emerging Scholar, Hernandez Rivera continues to advocate for and work to illuminate the experiences of intersectionally-marginalized people in education. She holds a B.A. in Women's and Gender Studies, Early Childhood Education, and Psychology from William Paterson University; an MA in Women's and Gender Studies from Rutgers University; and a PhD in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, with a minor in College Teaching, from the University of Missouri.

Jonathan A. McElderry is a nationally recognized scholar, speaker, and higher education leader committed to advancing equity, inclusion, and student success. He currently serves as Dean of Student Inclusive Excellence

and Assistant Professor at Elon University, where he brings a bold vision and nearly two decades of experience to supporting historically marginalized students—particularly at predominantly White institutions. He joined Elon in 2022 with a joint appointment in the divisions of Student Life and Inclusive Excellence.

A proud first-generation college graduate, Dr. McElderry holds a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri, an M.Ed. in College Student Personnel from Ohio University, and a B.S. in Administration of Justice from George Mason University. His research and practice focus on the success, identity development, and campus experiences of underrepresented student populations.

A thought leader in the fields of Student Affairs and College Student Development, Dr. McElderry has authored more than 15 scholarly publications, including peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters, and has presented nationally on issues of inclusive excellence. He is the co-editor of *Developing an Intersectional Consciousness and Praxis: Moving Toward Antiracist Efforts in Higher Education* and the forthcoming volume *Shaking the Table: Centering the Voices of Identity Center Practitioners*. Beyond academia, he serves as a Co-Lead Facilitator for the LeaderShape Institute and sits on the Editorial Boards of the *Journal of African American Males in Education* and the *Journal of Appreciative Education*. He is also a member of the Diversity Scholars Network at the University of Michigan's National Center for Institutional Diversity.

In 2025, Dr. McElderry began his term as the 86th President of ACPA—College Student Educators International, continuing a distinguished legacy of professional service. His leadership has been recognized through numerous honors, including the 2024 ACPA Nancy J. Evans Voices of Inclusion Award, the Annuet Coeptis Emerging Professional Award, the 2023 Diamond Honoree Award, recognition as one of the “40 Under 40” Most Influential African Americans in the Triad in 2022, and the 2021 Alumni Outstanding Early Career Award from the University of Missouri's College of Education.

Whether mentoring students and emerging professionals, leading institutional transformation, or challenging systemic inequities, Dr. McElderry remains grounded in his belief that education changes lives—and that every student deserves a place where they are seen, supported, and empowered to thrive.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Jaborius D. Ball (he/him) is a PhD student at Mississippi State University, where he designs strategic programs to enhance student success and foster inclusive environments. His research explores how Black student affairs professionals navigate systems of oppression at predominantly white institutions. As a U.S. Army Reserves Human Resource Specialist Sergeant, he brings leadership experience and a solid commitment to service. With 10+ years of extensive experience in diversity, equity, and inclusion, he is the owner of Keep Da Ball Rollin LLC, a consulting business specializing in DEI training, speaking engagements, curriculum development, and more. Guided by the motto “Progress in Motion, Purpose in Action,” Jaborius is dedicated to fostering growth and transformative justice. He holds a bachelor’s and master’s from Eastern Michigan University.

Tekita Bankhead, MS, RN-BSN (she/her) is the Director of Access & Community and Senior Diversity Officer for the Gies College of Business at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is an educator, speaker, writer, consultant, and strategist with over 13 years of professional experience in trauma-informed leadership, mental health outreach, health equity, Black cultural centers, and first-generation student success. Tekita earned her MS in Counselor Education/Student Affairs Administration from Mississippi State University and is a Registered Nurse (RN) with a BSN from Mississippi University for Women. Her scholarly and philanthropic efforts unapologetically center Black women; she is the Creator/Editor-in-Chief of The Pedestal Project, an organization dedicated to healing Black women through community and creative writing.

Erica T. Campbell, PhD (she/her) is an Assistant Professor of Student Affairs in Higher Education at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Her research primarily investigates the experiences of Black women multicultural center

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Angela Gay-Audre, PhD (she/they) serves as Director of the African American Cultural Center at NC State University. For over 18 years, they have worked to create more access to equitable futures. As a Black feminist worldbuilder, racial equity practitioner and scholar, cultural educator, poet, and storyteller, angela is a multi-hyphenate thinker and creator. Her work/scholarship includes interdisciplinary scholarship at the nexus of Black feminism, love praxis, and worldbuilding strategies. They are the founder of Collective Care LiberationHaus LLC. They believe higher education can be a site for radical change, people can always grow, and liberation is possible.

Luis H. Garay (they/Luis) is a PhD student in the Educational Studies program (concentration in Cultural Foundations) at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and the Director of the Gender and LGBTQIA Center at Elon University. With over a decade of experience, Garay has worked in various roles supporting minoritized student populations.

Their current research curiosity is understanding the experiences of queer and trans Latine students in k-12 school systems in the southeast region of the United States. Garay holds a BA from Dominican University (IL) and MS from University of Central Missouri.

Emerald S. Green (She/Her) is the Assistant Director of African American Student Development (AASD) at The University of California, Berkeley. Emerald has a Bachelor's from San Jose State University (SJSU) in Child and Adolescent Development (CHAD), Master's degree from the University of San Francisco (USF) in Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA), and is currently a Doctoral candidate at USF in the Organization and Leadership (EdD) program. She is an equity-minded educator, and brings with her direct experience and leadership in the following functional areas: Orientation and Transition, Fraternity and Sorority Life, Student Conduct, and Cultural and Affinity Space work.

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Julian Ignacio (he/any) is the Associate Director for Student Development & Evaluation at the Asian American Resource & Cultural Center. He leads the Asian American Mentor Program (AAMP) and its credit-bearing course GLAS 105: "Asian American Identities, Cultures, and Communities." Julian has a Master of Arts in Teaching History from UIC and a Master of Accounting Science from UIUC. Before returning to UIC professionally, Julian worked as a high school social studies teacher within Chicago Public Schools (CPS). Outside of UIC, Julian organizes for the National Alliance for Filipino Concerns (NAFCON). Prior to becoming an educator, Julian worked as a CPA for 7 years.

Bridgette Johnson Bridgette Johnson (she/her) is a proud member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., Bridgette embodies the values of sisterhood, service, and scholarship in everything she does. With more than 30 years of experience in higher education, she has been a champion for equity, leadership development, and institutional transformation. Building on that legacy, she launched That Bridge, a business rooted in creating meaningful change in how we support emerging professionals.

That Bridge helps employers move from traditional hiring practices to transformative engagement with emerging professionals. The focus is not just on preparing students for the workplace, but on preparing workplaces to truly welcome, support, and retain them. They don't just prepare emerging professionals. They prepare systems to receive them.

Tristen Brenaé Johnson, PhD (she/her) is a TEDx Speaker, author, scholar, curriculum designer, and mother. Dr Johnson works full-time as a Senior Engagement And Impact Advisor at Moffitt Cancer Center. She has over 10 years of experience in curriculum development and diversity, equity, and inclusion. She has a PhD from Illinois State University. Her research and academic book centers on the experiences of Black women diversity practitioners in historically white institutions. She is the owner of The Tristen Johnson, LLC, a consulting business centered on facilitation, training, keynote speaking, and developing curriculum around leadership, DEI, team building, and more. Dr Johnson has given keynote speeches and developed custom trainings for dozens of organizations. She is the lead author of the children's book *Black History Explorer: My Name, Our Power!*

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Jasmine A. Lee, MSW, PhD (she/her) is a diversity, equity, inclusion and justice scholar-practitioner. She currently serves as the Associate Vice President of Community and Culture in the Division of Institutional Equity at UMBC. She works with students, staff and faculty to create radically inclusive campus environments grounded in a commitment to radical love and belonging. Dr Lee's background encompasses campus climate studies and crisis response, inclusive hiring and supervision best practices, teaching and inclusive classroom pedagogy, dialogue pedagogy and facilitation, strategic student success outreach and academic advising, as well as traditional diversity and inclusion programming. Dr Lee commits to ensuring human dignity, love, truth, honesty and empathy are a part of all approaches to organizational change.

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Bruce E. Mitchell II, PhD (he/him) previously served as the Associate Vice President for Student Affairs, overseeing Accessibility & Belonging at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, VA. His research is focused in the areas of institutional reform, campus racial climate, student protests and demands, intergroup relations dialogue, curricular reform, and formalized mentoring initiatives. His research has informed his development of the T.I.R.I.F.C Framework, an acronym for institutions hoping to move Towards Implementing a Race and Identity Focused Curriculum that encompasses the intersections of historically underrepresented identities, their experiences, and identities.

Jamal J. Myrick, EdD (he/him) currently works as the Director of a Black Resource Center in California, where he champions the success of Black scholars on the campus and in the local community. Dr Myrick holds a bachelor's degree in International Affairs from Florida State University, a master's degree from George Mason University, and a Doctorate in Higher Education Leadership from Azusa Pacific University (2019). Dr Myrick's dedication to his craft in higher education over 10 years has been recognized with over 100 awards and active memberships in professional organizations like ABCC, WACUHO, NASPA, ACPA, SACSA, and VCCSA. Beyond academics and higher education, Dr Myrick is a published author. His books, *Dear Black Dads: Wisdom for Your Journey to Fatherhood* (#1 New Release on Amazon) and *Parenting is Hard AF: 53 Affirmations for Black Parents Who Struggle*, where he uses his journey of parenthood to empower Black families to continue changing the narratives set by society.

Carina Olaru (she/her) is a PhD student in American Studies at Purdue, and the Chicago-born daughter of Mexican immigrants. Her research explores space, place, and gender, focusing on Latino Cultural Centers (LCCs) in residential settings and their impact on relationships between students, staff, and universities. As the Director of Purdue's Latino Cultural Center and head of Student Advocacy and Education, Carina promotes student empowerment, access, and equity. Her leadership has led to expanded support for DACA students and a 52% increase in Purdue's Latinx student population. In her free time, she enjoys upcycling furniture, gardening, and time with her beautiful family.

Dana Murray Patterson, PhD (she, her, hers, y'all) is Vice-President and Chief Diversity Officer at Wingate University. She has over 30 years of progressive Higher Education experience including 5 different cultural centers. She earned her BA from Berea College, an MA from Eastern Kentucky University as well as her PhD from Washington State University. Her research focuses on lived experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and intellectual identity development. Dr Patterson is a celebrated spoken word artist and has four adult children including three daughters and one son (and a daughter-in-law).

Bulaong Ramiz, EdD (she/they) is a Black and Boricua Queer Muslim activist educator who, after a decade long career in equity and inclusion centers in higher education, left the field in order to pursue opportunities more aligned with her commitment to justice and liberation. Today, Dr Ramiz serves as a private consultant for various nonprofits and organizations engaged in community care efforts. Dr Ramiz also volunteers advising college student organizers across the country on coalition building, campus protest, and strategic safety planning. Dr Ramiz obtained her doctorate at

the University of Kansas, where her research focused on factors of departure for Black equity practitioners.

A. Pierre Sherrill II, EdD (he/they/friend) An agent of positive change, with over 15 years of experience working with college students and as a nonprofit executive, Pierre's passion to see people engage in their own path towards liberation has charted an exciting journey of constant learning, fun and fulfillment. He makes critical conversations surrounding social justice issues palatable for baseline understanding. He has facilitated equity-focused learning at his alma mater, California State University, Northridge, Fresno State, and the University of San Francisco. He obtained his Doctorate in Education from San Diego State University, where he studied the impact of race on Black men's engagement with authority figures.

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Jason K. Wallace, PhD (he/him) is an associate professor of higher education leadership in the College of Education at Mississippi State University. Before joining the professoriate, he worked for a decade in student affairs, primarily in multicultural services. His research explores the experiences of Black and first-generation students, faculty, and staff in higher education. Dr Wallace earned his PhD in Education, specializing in College Student Affairs Administration, from the University of Georgia, and holds both a master's and bachelor's degree from Texas Christian University.

Jordan Shelby West, PhD (she/her) is the Associate Vice Provost for Diversity, Equity and Community Engagement at The George Washington University. Dr West is a national consultant and also holds a faculty appointment in Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies, teaching courses on Black Feminist Theory. Dr West's experience and continued research interests focus on campus climate, narrative and storytelling as a method, and how individuals from historically marginalized identities work toward liberation. Dr West disrupts white supremacy through the lens of Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory and through the process of dismantling systemic oppression.

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FOREWORD

Jordan Shelby West

We come together with hearts that know hurt, but souls that choose joy...testifying that we matter.

—Young (2022)

We do this work on the shoulders of our ancestors. We are chosen to meet people where they dream and join them in their journey. We believe that systems were designed and can be redesigned. We find hope in the dark and see the light in every single person. We can hold it all. Fight to not fall apart. Cry tears of joy. Yell from the top of our lungs. And then, wake up to do it all again the next day.

This is for the one who sees the sunrise, but rarely sees the sunset because they're in the walls of the Ivory Tower all day.

The ones who sacrifice home, romance, their health, vitamin D, and even fresh air to hold a student experience, systemic violence, and institutional repression as simply part of the weight they bare.

This is for the ones who wake up in the middle of the night, worried about a student who is calling because they may take their life. Who fear that first trip home over break, when they have to tell their family they've changed from Michelle to Mike.

This is for the one wearing their viewpoints, beliefs, and affiliations on their chest or in a subtle picture in their office, and told, *it has no place, put it to rest.*

This is for the Hijabi wearing woman with an Arabic tongue that beautifully shares the stories and traditions of home, but feels that home is invalidated by their institution's tone.

This is for the Black woman showing up authentically, grounded in a practice of radical love, present each day with a smile on her face and heaviness in her heart from carrying the pain of Black students who are denied the internship for their locks or forced to take a class where professors

diminish their experiences, or even use the n-word. Despite the fear of job loss for advocating just a little too much for “those students,” she speaks truth to power knowing no one else will do it.

This is for the one presenting, publishing, and paneling to open more doors for their success...meanwhile unacknowledged for their contributions, abilities, and knowledge at their home institutions.

This is for the one serving on committee, after committee, after committee...without appreciation or even acknowledgement. Who time and time again is being asked to silence part or all identities, to not ruffle feathers or disrupt business as usual.

This is for the young, just out of undergrad, graduate student who is sunshine in human form with pride in identities and experiences that others treat as burdens, or even threats, holding such beautiful gifts...meanwhile supporting students who those others say just don't fit.

To the one always striving to educate themselves on the experiences of students with varying identities, despite the ways students might not always honor theirs.

This is for the one creating ideas and doing the work, but your supervisor over there acting like they carried the torch.

For the one staying up reading hooks, while using their small savings to purchase students' books.

For the one with their cape on in the margins using superpowers, who fears each day could be their last hour.

This is for the hopeful, the believer, the possibility model.

For the auntie, big sibling, and forever role model.

The one who never misses a moment to celebrate students, while showing up in most rooms fighting and advocating, at times for their students' right to exist, but also their own.

This is for you

The identity center practitioner who puts their body on the line, but is expected to be fine

The ones who scream from the mountaintop to open the cage and let the Blackbird fly

The one fighting every day to ensure DEI doesn't die.

This is for you

I love you.

—by Jordan Shelby West

From sit ins to walk outs to organizing, the histories of identity centers are rooted in resistance, surviving, and healing.

I was a fresh 18 years of age when I stepped into the Nyumburu Cultural Center at the University of Maryland College Park during my first year of college. I remember attending Juke Joint at Nyumburu in the first week or two of school. You could hear the music from outside, and see a

line wrapped around the building to get in; and the outfits – the outfits said it all. Students came to the first Juke Joint of the year ready, and of course I was cute too! You could tell who the junior and senior students were because they were smoothly walking to the front, everyone greeting them hello as they strolled by with their seats reserved. When the football and men’s basketball teams arrived, everyone seemed to perk up a bit; and when the women’s volleyball and basketball teams approached the door, everyone gave them much respect. While the Greeks strolled, the music shifted from GoGo to Baltimore Club. And then Juke Joint began. From poets to painters, background singers to battle dancers, the Juke Joint was being Black at UMD. Juke Joint was a love letter from the cultural center staff to the Black students, and all students holding historically marginalized identities, at UMD. The embodiment of culture, the permission to just be, the head nods and handshakes that said, “I see you, welcome home,” to the smell of butters hitting the beautiful shades of melanin that filled Nyumburu wall to wall—we were home at the cultural center.

Joy is an act of resistance. [Derricotte \(2008\)](#)

At predominantly white institutions, the existence of places like Nyumburu at UMD in itself is a disruption and recognition that folks holding historically marginalized identities are not in fact included throughout the fabric of the university. The physical act of entering a cultural center or an identity center in higher education is a coming home—a homecoming. Students fill the space that staff artistically curate, craft, create, and imagine. Staff committed to working in identity centers have a clear assignment ahead and are constantly required to negotiate and navigate the waters of white supremacy, sexism, heterosexism, and more, while typically holding experiences and identities of marginalization themselves. To lead an identity center during their inception to current day, requires a clear understanding that oppressive systems were not designed with all of us in mind, and definitely not with the thought that marginalized peoples would be successful. Staff meet students where they dream and know they have futures, when others may have already written a different ending to their stories. Identity center staff know systems are oppressive, recognize higher education is grounded in these systems, and still find opportunities in the walls of the Ivory Tower for historically marginalized students to thrive. Cultural and identity centers are sites of resistance, joy, love, challenge, education, accountability, and most importantly, truth telling. In a day’s work, this is the weight and gift that the staff carry.

The heart of justice is truth telling, seeing ourselves and the world the way it is rather than the way we want it to be. More than ever before we, as a society, need to renew a commitment to truth telling. [hooks \(1999\)](#)

About 5 years after my first Juke Joint, I met Jonathan. As our relationship grew over the next few years, I began to admire his poise, integrity, and deep love for working in identity centers. Jonathan's devotion and protection of his work and his students, specifically Black students, has always been unwavering. While I knew and felt all of this, it wasn't until Jonathan was at Mizzou, directing the Black cultural center that I truly understood. During a time of heightened protest and Black students advocating for all of what they always deserved (and were owed), Jonathan was their rock. From sleepless nights to endless meetings, Jonathan was the person both students were relying on and colleagues were leaning on. Jonathan's love for both Black people and Mizzou were at odds, but he found himself positioned to actually move both forward. No one else had the relationships with Black students and colleagues the way Jonathan did, and truly continues to. As the director of this center at the time, Jonathan held a position and experience that absolutely no one will ever fully understand; this is identity center work.

I have a duty to speak the truth as I see it and to share not just my triumphs, not just the things that felt good, but the pain, the intense, often unmitigating pain. [Lorde \(2004\)](#)

While I didn't meet Stephanie in person until more recently, I thought I knew her for years upon our first hug. Stephanie has always been part of Jonathan's story, particularly at Mizzou. It was comforting knowing that Stephanie was with Jonathan amidst all he was holding. I always had a high regard for Stephanie, but that was not even close to what I felt when I got to experience her personally. Everything I knew from Jonathan about Stephanie's commitment to feminist scholarship, women's and gender studies, being a proud Puerto Rican woman, and more just came to life when she edited my book chapter in their first co-edited book. Stephanie challenged me, she was thoughtful, honest, and held clear high expectations of me as well. She pushed me to find things in myself that she knew were there, just by virtue of what we knew we shared already. Stephanie's love for students, desire to dismantle systems of oppression, and badass presence has been liberating to experience. She embodies community and the ancestral teachings of what it means to be in this work together, despite and because of our differences.

If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together. [Watson \(1985\)](#)

In life, we don't get to journey with many people through their most vulnerable moments. In fact, it's a privilege to "do life" with others in a way that goes beyond the surface. To have people in your chosen circle who

fully see you, seek to always understand you, lead with integrity, and show up honestly and authentically is a treasure. These bonds are solid, unwavering, unquestionable, and sturdy despite any lapse in time, distance, and age. When you find someone who is committed to “do life” with you and become a chosen member of your circle, you pour all the way in.

I am grateful to “do life” with Jonathan. Jonathan and Stephanie, along with multiple authors in this book, have seen me and are the community I call on and call in. The lists of programs, publications, awards, and national recognition are helpful credentials, but the hearts, minds, and souls of Jonathan and Stephanie are what really counts. Any student who gets to meet Jonathan and Stephanie, soon become the students asking them for recommendations, and then shortly after inviting them to their weddings, baby showers, and milestone birthdays. Any colleague who gets to work with Jonathan and Stephanie moves up, grows, and learns to lead by example and be seen doing the work – always looking back and pulling others forward, sankofa.

Jonathan and Stephanie, on so many occasions, you were served lemons and despite it all, you made your best lemonade.

The plant people have taught me to be generous and not be shy about blossoming, that it is our nature. I think when others see us, it can inspire them to open up and blossom too and we can be a field ablaze with dignity and beauty together. [Brown \(2017\)](#)

We see the fractures in the world and actually have the audacity to dream of possibilities where we’re no longer so broken. It’s quite beautiful to be a hope dealer and a privilege to be in space with people like Jonathan and Stephanie, who have dreamt of this book. To the reader, I say cherish this moment and the invitation to listen to the stories of your colleagues, friends, siblings, and aunties/titis who do the liberatory work, in historically marginalized bodies, and for the students and colleagues who you may have pushed into the margins—literally and figuratively.

This book is a love letter from Jonathan and Stephanie to those in the resistance, serving as healers while healing, and dreaming while being oppressed. I see all of you. Ubuntu.

If you are silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it. [Hurston \(1942\)](#)

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CHAPTER 1

SURVIVING AND HEALING: IDENTITY CENTER PRACTITIONERS' NAVIGATING IDENTITY, POWER, AND POSITION

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Identity centers on college campuses have been instrumental in supporting the experiences of students with marginalized identities for decades (Hernandez Rivera, 2023; Lozano, 2019; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Norlin & Morris, 2000; Patton, 2006a; Princes, 1994; Saia, 2022; Self & Hudson, 2015). Although existing scholarship highlights how these spaces provide varying forms of development and guidance to students in their collegiate journeys (Patton, 2006b; Reid & Ebede, 2018; Strayhorn et al., 2012), there is still an absence of the experiences of practitioners in these spaces. Patton's (2010) edited text highlights the contributions of cultural centers to the experiences of students of Color in particular, naming the history, context, and challenges these centers undergo, while providing

an understanding of the experiences of students of Color at PWIs and the benefits of these centers. Patton shares, the “knowledge of these diverse [practitioner] perspectives is essential to recognizing the larger mission of culture centers; a mission rooted in bringing voice, support, and celebration to college students, particularly those from racially underrepresented populations” (p. xiv). Patton and colleagues allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of this work and insights that can inform future practice. This text builds on this work through centering the experiences of staff working in these spaces; experiences that require significant attention during a time of increased scrutiny, accountability, and elimination of equity and inclusion efforts broadly.

By the time this volume is published, identity centers and higher education as a whole may look significantly different from what we have known. With the election of a new President in the US, whose values often conflict with the purpose and mission of identity centers on college campuses, we acknowledge that staff in these spaces are facing, and may continue to face, uncertain and difficult times to say the least. These challenges may force staff to alter long-standing practices, reimagine how they support their designated populations, potentially change the names of their centers, and, in the worst case, face the possibility of their jobs and centers being eliminated altogether. We also know that staff within these spaces have been instrumental in pursuing change on their campuses and protecting their students from harm. In doing so, they have often “shaken” the proverbial table that they have not been invited to or outright excluded from. Our goal for this volume was to provide a space for practitioners to share how they have shaken up their work, and even themselves in pursuit of survival and healing in identity centers. Both current and former practitioners share their stories, experiences and testimonios to others engaged in this work. Their offerings provide insights into their lived experiences with the hope of shaping a better future for identity center staff.

OUR CONNECTING PATHS

Stephanie

I began my journey in an identity center as a graduate student. After interviewing to be the graduate student of student involvement at Ramapo College, the hiring committee felt that I would be better suited for a new position as the graduate assistant of equity and inclusion programs. This was a position that would be housed in the Women’s Center. Within it,

I would supervise student staff, coordinate and collaborate on heritage month programming, and create new programs and initiatives, while I pursued a Master's degree in Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University. Although I thought my time working in higher education would be temporary, I soon realized that I enjoyed working in an identity center. Supporting students of Color in finding and creating their space at a predominantly white institution, and facilitating their development as leaders, thinkers, and people was something I was invested in. I felt I was carrying on the legacy of my own mentor, who was intentional about supporting students of Color, particularly Women of Color. I would choose a career in higher education, and go on to serve as the director of a campus Multicultural Center at the University of Missouri.

There, I would experience challenges in adjusting to the culture in the midwest and a completely different institution type, as a Puerto Rican woman, early career professional. I was unaware of all of the ways I was *supposed* to maneuver in this new context; while hyperaware (based on my previous experience) of what I should do to not be perceived as threatening or intimidating in this work. It was at Mizzou that I met Jonathan, who would soon become a friend and trusted colleague. His support and friendship would make an impossible experience less challenging. Although, it certainly was no stroll in the park by any means. We came together to share about our more challenging experiences, navigating campus protest, the inaction of others around inequity, and how oppressive ideologies would manifest in our interpersonal interactions with colleagues (McElderry & Hernandez Rivera, 2017). It was through our connected disempowerment that we sought to liberate ourselves, largely doing so through our everyday interactions, but also through the many works we would co-create (Hernandez Rivera et al., 2021; McElderry & Hernandez Rivera, 2024). As a result, we refer to ourselves as *scholar siblings*, co-creating a kinship based on our shared experience in overcoming oppressive conditions, together. It is a relationship containing an intimacy grounded in love for ourselves and one another reflected in both feeling and action (see bell hooks, 2002). We have demonstrated an individual and collective desire and effort to process and heal the pain and marginalization endured in higher education and that each other has been witness to over time. It is a commitment to one another's growth and development; and honoring of one another's identities, experiences, and ways of being and doing. Identity center work became the space that would foster our continued bond and investment in exploring the experiences of others who could understand us and who shared similar connections; it was also where we began to shake a table or two.

Jonathan

For over 15 years, my work in higher education has been deeply rooted in identity center initiatives, both as a scholar and practitioner. Through my praxis, scholarship, and professional service, I have consistently focused on supporting identity centers within colleges and universities. As a first-year graduate student, my assistantship was based in the Multicultural Center, where I worked with diverse populations and led a programming board specifically focused on Black identity and experiences. Additionally, my practicum experience in the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs and Retention involved mentoring programs aimed at increasing scholarship opportunities and representation for underrepresented groups at Ohio University.

This trajectory led me to the role of directing the Black Culture Center at the University of Missouri during the height of the national Concerned Student 1950 protests. As an advisor to key student organizations like the Legion of Black Collegians (Black Student Government), National Pan-Hellenic Council, and Mizzou Black Men's Initiative, I was highly connected to the Black community, and my insights were frequently sought by senior administrators. This experience, which began with the unrest in 2013 and peaked in the Fall 2015 protests, allowed me to witness and contribute to important institutional and community shifts.

After my time at Mizzou, I became the inaugural Executive Director of a recently renamed Multicultural Center to the Intercultural Center at Wake Forest University, where the work expanded to meet the growing needs of students of Color and international students. I also served on various university committees and task forces aimed at improving the experiences of students of Color and international students while promoting intercultural literacy across campus. Currently, at Elon University, I oversee multiple identity-based centers, serve on the leadership teams for two divisions, and drive initiatives centered on inclusive excellence. Drawing from our shared experiences—having worked together a decade ago—Stephanie and I now find ourselves back on the same campus, creating new memories, advancing scholarship, shaping a new generation of students, and shaking things up occasionally. From a service perspective, I am now stepping into my role as the 86th President of ACPA-College Student Educators International. Throughout my tenure with ACPA, I have served in multiple leadership positions, including the governing board, and now as the senior student affairs officer. I bring a comprehensive understanding to equity and inclusion work, informed by my experiences across institutions of varying sizes, regions, and missions.

OVERVIEW OF IDENTITY CENTERS

Identity centers are spaces on college campuses that provide support and services for a group that has been historically marginalized in the campus community and society at large (Renn, 2011). These spaces also often simultaneously provide education and learning opportunities for all members of the community about said group (Benitez, 2010; Kupo & Castellon, 2018; Women’s Center, n.d.). The first identity centers were largely women or Black culture centers, with the first women’s center emerging in 1960 at the University of Minnesota (The Women’s Center, n.d.), and the first Black culture center established at Rutgers University in 1969 (Student Affairs, n.d.). During Civil rights movements, Black students’ activism forced administrators to meet their needs, in part creating Black Studies Departments, cultural centers and minority student services (Hefner, 2002; Patton, 2006a, 2006b; Stovall, 2005; Young, 1986). The 1965 Higher Education Act, Title IV, and Title VI have also contributed to diversifying college campuses, thus requiring services that would support students of Color in particular (Princes, 1994). Hefner (2002) explains that Black culture centers also date back to the “early 1900s, when small numbers of Blacks were selected to attend White institutions” (para. 22). The development of women’s centers has been connected to the Women’s Liberation movement of the 1970s, but also continuing education in the 1960s which aimed to assist women students who were “over the age of twenty-five” in their adjustment to the college campus (Bengiveno, 2000). Women’s Centers that emerged throughout the 1970s largely addressed political issues impacting women’s lives, and were a response to campus cultures that were hostile and violent (Penn Women’s Center, n.d.). Chicano and Latine activism was also central to the emergence of Latine student groups and cultural centers (Beltrán, 2010; Lozano, 2010, 2019). Centers supporting Asian and Indigenous student experiences would also emerge, and at times would be based on geographic region and student demographics (Liu et al., 2010; Shotton et al., 2010). Offices in the South serving predominantly Black students, while those in the Southwest may have historically served Latine and/or Indigenous students (Shuford, 2011). In the 1980s and 1990s, multicultural services areas were also tasked with supporting other student populations such as, students of marginalized religions, women, and LGBTQ students (Shuford, 2011).

LGBTQ Centers would also materialize in the 1970s as a response to student protest and heterosexist climates and attacks (D’Emilio, 1992; Marine, 2011; Sanlo et al., 2011). Most recently, disability cultural centers have been established to provide disabled students with a space to build and explore disability as a social identity (Saia, 2022). These centers have slowly emerged since the early 1990s (Elmore et al., 2018).

Inevitably identity centers were created because of, resistance to dominant culture, organizing/advocacy, a politically-charged campus event, through an identified need, or other contextual factors (D’Emilio, 1992; Dept. of Sociology & Anthropology, 2022; Elmore et al., 2018; Gould, 1997; Lozano, 2019; PAACH, n.d.; Parker & Freedman, 1999; Patton, 2010; Pedota, 2024; Sanlo et al., 2011; Stevenson, 2024). These centers have been tasked with varying scopes of work which often include: supporting student retention and academic success; providing psychological support and counseling students; crisis response; facilitating trainings and programming to the campus at large and students in their space; and community outreach (Benitez, 2010; Gould, 1997; Hefner, 2002; Jones & William, 2006; Lozano, 2019; Ortiz & Mandala, 2021; Shotton et al., 2010; Shuford, 2011). Centers also provide a myriad of development opportunities. Education and learning is a central component, whether creating awareness for the larger campus community on historical or contemporary socio-political issues, or allowing students of marginalized identities to connect to their identity, history and culture in ways they have not previously had access to (Castillo-Montoya & Verduzco Reyes, 2020; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Patton, 2006a; Rosado & Toya, 2015; Saia, 2022). Furthermore, identity center staff support their students in finding community, feeling a sense of connection to the campus, and identifying resources to support their experiences (Elmore et al., 2018; Hypolite, 2020a; Jenkins, 2008; Leath et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2010; Lozano, 2014; Marine, 2011; Shotton et al., 2010). These centers affirm students and facilitate their development as leaders, allowing them to develop skills and strategies to work alongside others (Jones et al., 2002; Lozano, 2019; McDowell & Higbee, 2014; Nickels & Trier-Bieniek, 2017; Parker & Freedman, 1999; Strayhorn et al., 2012). They also create opportunities for faculty and staff on campus to learn and build community (Chiang, 2020; Liu et al., 2010; Parker & Freedman, 1999).

Norlin and Morris (2000) underscore how dynamics such as “culture shock, isolation and discrimination were added obstacles to keep diverse groups off-balance” (p. 149). This continues to be a reality for students of Color (Fields et al., 2024; Morales, 2021), queer students (Blankenau et al., 2023; Mollet et al., 2021), trans and nonbinary students (Marx et al., 2024; Woodford et al., 2020), disabled students (Carroll et al., 2020; Eisenman et al., 2020), women (Klein & Martin, 2021; Miller et al., 2021), and especially for those who exist at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities (Day et al., 2024; Domingue, 2015; Duran, 2021; Hernandez Rivera, 2023; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Pepin & Talbot, 2013; Revilla, 2010; Strayhorn et al., 2008). Identity centers contribute to a sense of connection and psychological safety for students, particularly students of color, as they do not feel increased pressure to experience one-dimensional stereotypes, speak on behalf of their identities, or experience microaggressions

(Cheesman et al., 2008; González, 2002; Hypolite, 2020a; Liu et al., 2010; Lozano, 2019; Self & Hudson, 2015; Strayhorn et al., 2012). This phenomenon is described through the concept of a *counterspace*, a space that counters dominant culture and experiences in the larger campus (Croom et al., 2017; Keels, 2020; Shotton et al., 2010; Solórzano et al., 2000). Students across marginalized identities also share how these spaces offer respite from the othering they experience (Chiang, 2020; González, 2002; Marine et al., 2017; Patton, 2006a; Saia, 2022).

Identity centers should not go without critique, as they at times operate in ways that address a single identity, not considering how they may exclude other marginalized identities and experiences (Blair-Medeiros & Nelson-Alford, 2021; Hernandez Rivera, 2020; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). Scholars and practitioners have emphasized the importance of considering students intersectionality oppressed identities (Jennrich & Kowalski-Braun, 2014; Negrete & Purcell, 2011; Nicolazzo & Harris, 2014; Pepin & Talbot, 2013), while also recognizing how institutions are structured in a way that reinforces a single-issue approach to support (Harris & Patton, 2017). Despite challenges in supporting students across marginalized identities, scholarship highlights the crucial role identity centers and staff within them play in the experiences of students. Students see staff in these spaces as champions who genuinely care about their personhood, experiences, and development (Hypolite, 2020a; Jeffries & Boyd, 2020; Jones et al., 2002; Patton, 2006b; Saia, 2022). Staff in identity centers take on a significant amount of work and responsibility, while experiencing a multitude of obstacles as they navigate how to best support their students.

IDENTITY CENTER PRACTITIONERS NAVIGATING THEIR WORK

There is little research on the experiences of staff in these spaces. However, existing work does name the constraints that staff within these spaces operate under. For instance, despite being used as recruitment tools for incoming students (Baum, 2012; Torres, 2009), centers can often be under-resourced, receive a lack of institutional support, and a lack of staffing (Campbell, 2022; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Negrete & Purcell, 2011; Reid & Ebede, 2018; Vega, 2019). These centers have also at times been led by students themselves, containing no or very few professional staff members (Bengiveno, 2000; Chiang, 2020; Division of Student Life, n.d.; Kasper, 2004b; Penn Women's Center, n.d.). Even so, campus identity centers may often be the first area that is called upon or that students are encouraged to turn to during a point of crisis (McElderry & Hernandez Rivera, 2017), a reality echoed by authors in this volume.

Despite how these centers are under-resourced and under-staffed, staff and students within them often make magic happen as they strive to meet the needs of students through collaboration (Campbell, 2022; Harris & Patton, 2017; Hypolite, 2020a). However collaborating with colleagues also presents unique challenges as practitioners navigate colleagues who lack knowledge about their work or who treat them as the sole individual responsible for supporting lgbt, women, students of Color or those with disabilities (Gould, 1997; Lozano, 2019; Norlin & Morris, 2000; Sutton & McCluskey-Titus, 2010). Staff within these spaces understand what is at stake in supporting their students. Existing research, and even some of the authors of our chapters underscore how staff are instrumental in creating experiences for students where they feel heard, validated, and have models of possibility they can aspire to (Jones & William, 2006).

Within identity center work, practitioners are often overextended (Hernandez Rivera & Frias, 2021; Kasper, 2004b) and must navigate navigate the political terrain of their campus communities and institutional leaders who have differing perspectives on how this work should operate, as well as external local and state influences (Marine, 2011; Sanlo et al., 2011; Vega, 2019). Marine (2011) notes that the establishment of LGBTQ Centers on college campuses with a conservative politics can be particularly challenging, as public institutions must answer and are also held accountable by government entities. For instance, LGBTQ, race and ethnic, and gender centers have been eliminated in states with highly conservative politics such as Florida and Texas (Riedel, 2024; Schermele, 2023), and individuals continue to question the existence of women's centers and their relevance in contemporary society (Kupo & Castellon, 2018). This can lead to control and surveillance of identity centers, and even eradication (Pedota, 2024; Vega, 2019).

Practitioners in these spaces also often lack positional power that would allow them to create change within the larger institutional structure; and do so, as people who often also possess marginalized identities. They often share the identities that students within their spaces hold, navigating their own experiences with exclusion, stereotyping, and marginalization. For example, Ortiz and Mandala's (2021) research exploring the experiences of staff in LGBTQ Centers highlights that "cultural tropes create emotional expectations for staff of color to be especially happy and positive at work" specifically queer staff of color (p. 12). Simultaneously, because of tropes that exist about queer people at large and the need to gain buy-in from the community in supporting LGBTQ students, White queer staff may express frustration about racism, but do not necessarily confront colleagues or challenge the institution in this respect. Campbell's (2022) dissertation study specifically highlights the challenges Black women in cultural centers face as they contend with "controlling images" that regulate and inform