

Creating Co-Curricular Activist Writing Projects for Students in Writing Programs: The Case of the Neurodiversity Celebration Collaborative (NCC)

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Introduction

This essay presents the case of the James Madison University (JMU) Neurodiversity Celebration Collaborative (NCC)—a student group that originated in JMU's School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication (WRTC). I suggest that the NCC provides evidence for how writing programs can center mental well-being by creating space and leadership opportunities for students who are marginalized due to their mental health and/or disability statuses; co-curricular programs like the NCC allow such students to intervene in mental well-being for themselves and on their campuses.

Context

The NCC originally came into being through calls from various corners for more attention to the unmet mental health needs of college students and students with autism (Beiter et al.; Bruffaerts et al.; Lipson et al.; Pinder-Amake; Storrie et al.) as well as calls from disability activists for more space to support, highlight, and celebrate disabled and neurodiverse persons and the rich diversity they bring to our campuses (Dwyer et al.; Clouder et al.; Sachs; Yergeau). The NCC was created in 2018, and the calls for more attention and care for college students' mental well-being have only deepened over time—particularly during and following the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lederer et al.; Liu et al.; Salimi et al.; Zhai and Du). In the same way, attention to disability and accommodations also intensified due to the pandemic; activists pointed out that the accommodations long denied disabled persons had suddenly become available since neurotypical and temporarily able-bodied individuals needed such dispensations (Aydos et al.; Boden; Lyons; Kurtzberg).

As a faculty member whose research has been in mental health rhetoric, I found myself increasingly in conversations about what could be done to alleviate mental and emotional suffering on campus. Equally concerning was how stigma could marginalize students with cognitive difference and students who were open about mental health diagnoses and treatments; their impairments were highlighted over and against the more generous impulse to foreground the unique affordances of the ways they think and live. Stigma, too, could interfere with their desire or willingness to seek care, treatment, and/or accommodations.

Additionally, in conversations in the field on the role expressive writing might play in writing programs, the voices of those with cognitive difference are usually demonstrably absent. The NCC was co-created with students with a variety of cognitive differences and/or experiences with mental health struggles from the start. The students led the initiative to name the student group and articulate its mission and priorities. We chose the name “Neurodiversity Celebration Collaborative” as a way to make it clear that the group values a wide variety of cognitive types and styles; students appreciated that the term *neurodiversity* “describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one ‘right’ way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits” (Baumer and Frueh). That said, the group was also aware of the origins of the term “neurodiversity” and took time to unpack and celebrate the contributions of individuals with autism to the development and deployment of the term. That is, recognizing that neurodiversity “refers to the diversity of all people, but it is often used in the context of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as well as other neurological or developmental conditions such as ADHD or learning disabilities,” they used the term with care and respect for the celebratory and activist nature of the term and its ability to convey honor and respect for mental difference writ large (Baumer and Frueh).

Description of Initiative

I created the NCC with a group of students in 2018 with a small internal grant. The mission of the NCC as it was conceived by the founding students and articulated by founding student director Will Khairalla is as follows:

The mission of the Neurodiversity Celebration Collaborative is to address negative attitudes, misconceptions, and stigmas surrounding cognitive and mental health differences by viewing mental health as a continuum rather than a binary in which mental health is either achieved or not achieved. Through strategic research and advocacy, we will evaluate current mental health resources on and off campus, create appreciation versus sympathy for cognitive differences, bring to light inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the literature, establish appropriate forums of disclosure for students, and ultimately help constitute a more connected and understanding campus climate that celebrates neurodiversity as an integral part of any functioning university and its surrounding community.

Given this mission, the group decided that a viable first initiative would be what they called “non-clinical conversation groups”—public events where they

would host a group of their peers to discuss a specific topic related to mental well-being. The group hosted events on such topics as anxiety, depression, homesickness, and finding your place. The logic behind these conversation groups is that students often need non-clinical support for mental well-being. To prepare to facilitate these conversation groups, founding group leaders underwent training through a local mental health practitioner, via an abbreviated version of a mental health first aid program. In that program, they learned important do's and don'ts for facilitating these kinds of meetings, and they used those to develop guidelines for future group leaders. Those guidelines focused on appropriate responses to students in distress as well as resources and tips for when further support is needed. In the second year, we held a public launch event in which the founding student leaders shared their own stories related to neurodiversity and encouraged others to get involved. In the third year, the students worked to become a recognized student group. When everything went virtual, the group held Zoom events to varying degrees of success. Finally, most recently during the 2021-2022 academic year, the group held an event in which they discussed the concept of neurodiversity itself with a wider audience.

Despite its successes, the NCC has not been without its challenges. The group was still in its infancy when the COVID-19 pandemic moved everything virtual, and students were feeling incredibly spread thin as we moved slowly back to campus. We have struggled, with some of our events, to get robust participation or even very much participation beyond those already invested. Still, the group has been a success due to how it has given agency and space to those who've been drawn to the group via their own mental health challenges and cognitive differences. Through the NCC, they've had the opportunity to meet, talk with, and work with peers with similar experiences in a supportive and celebratory environment. They have also produced several key texts that have provided relevant professional experience, including the group guidelines, the mission statement, lists and descriptions of initiatives, meeting agendas, meeting minutes, and social media posts.

Many publications on socioemotional learning and writing as a way of healing are written from the standpoint of a mentally stable and objective scholar-practitioner describing their theoretical approach to or practical experiences with student writers (see, for example, Anderson and MacCurdy; Toepfer and Walker). The NCC takes as a given that writing programs can and must contribute to student well-being via not only tending to pedagogical approaches that are responsive to the variety of challenges our students face, but also by offering students spaces to use their expertise in writing in advocacy roles around campus. I leveraged my position as a faculty member in writing to gather the resources and students through which the NCC could be created.

I, then, handed off primary responsibility for running the group to students themselves such that their voices could be heard.

Implications

The creation and existence of the NCC makes a strong argument that more writing programs should see themselves as well-positioned to help students to engage in activist work related to mental well-being around their own campuses. Rather than seeing our roles as teachers of writing as limited to offering students opportunities to reflect on and increase their own well-being via writing assignments, we might, instead, see our positions in writing programs as ideal ones from which to empower our students to advocate on behalf of themselves and others. For those who'd like to similarly mobilize writing students, I suggest, as a start, looking for local grants and other funding sources that could offer seed money through which to get your initiative off the ground. As in the NCC, even modest funds can be used for such things as funding a logo design contest, buying swag to share at events, and planning and holding a public launch event. Once funding is sorted out, advertising the opportunity to take part in the initiative is key, as is onboarding students and giving them the power to make decisions for the group. Once a founding student group is established, it is a good idea to have the group come to consensus on a student leader. Establishing student leaders is a crucial step in moving the faculty member out of the leadership role and making it clear to students that they have agency and the final say in how things will go. Setting an agenda for the initiatives the group will take on and supporting the students as they execute these initiatives is important. Finally, if the group is to survive from year to year, it is important to get it recognized as an official student group through your university and to spend some time each fall establishing that year's student leaders. If the department can support a GA and there is one in your department with a complimentary background and interests, having one to help to lead the group can be an incredibly valuable asset. Still, even without a GA, with the right group of student leaders, groups like the NCC can take on modest goals for initiatives during the year.

As a field, we can move beyond addressing students' well-being via pedagogical approaches to writing as a way of healing at the expense of inspiring our students to take on more overtly public and activist standpoints related to mental and emotional well-being. As the NCC and similar initiatives show, writing programs can center mental well-being by creating space and leadership opportunities for marginalized students to intervene in mental well-being for themselves and others on their campuses.

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