

Chapter 10

A Place for Us: Exploring Gender and Sexuality Resource Centers Within the Postsecondary Orgscape

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ABSTRACT

Gender and sexuality resource centers (GSRCs) are identity-based resource centers focused on LGBTQIA2S+ identities and communities. This chapter employs a critical organizational theory lens to explore how genderism and cisheterosexism serve as organizing principles for higher education institutions (HEIs). Through the organizational placement and resourcing (financial and human resources) of GSRCs, HEIs allow GSRCs to exist as long as they serve as symbols of the inclusiveness of the organization and validation of the organization's benevolence.

Gender and Sexuality Resource Centers (GSRCs) are campus-based resource centers within higher education institutions (HEIs) that support lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual, and Two Spirit (LGBTQIA2S+) constituencies through education, engagement, events, advocacy, and policy change. In recent years, a robust field of scholarship has developed on GSRCs. Much of this scholarship has focused on the relationship between centers and students or on the individual experiences of GSRC practitioners. By applying a critical organizational theory lens to GSRCs and their placement within the organizational landscape (or orgscape) of an institution, I will explore how GSRCs function as mere symbols of inclusion. As such, HEIs critically understaff and financially under-resource GSRCs. GSRCs struggle with ill-defined scopes, competing constituencies, and organizational placements that stifle the ability of GSRC practitioners to effectively work for change. GSRC practitioners are hired to play a rigged game.

In this chapter¹, I will first explore the history and role of GSRCs. Second, I will discuss cisheterosexism² and genderism³ as organizing principles of organizations. I will then introduce critical organizational theory and consider the challenges GSRCs face within the orgscape. I interrogate how the organizational

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placement of GSRCs impacts centers and practitioners. Next, I consider how GSRCs serve as symbols of inclusion and how HEIs appropriate discourses of LGBTQIA2S+ equity, inclusion, and belonging. If HEIs are viewed as the primary constituent of a GSRC, are GSRCs truly counter spaces (or safer spaces) or are they symbols of inclusion that maintain the status quo? I will conclude by sharing recommendations for practice and future research.

POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

I am a seasoned student affairs professional and equity, inclusion, and belonging practitioner with many years of experience leading identity-based campus resource centers. I currently serve as the director of the University of Michigan Spectrum Center, the first and one of the most well-staffed and resourced GSRCs. I am a long-time general member and current Executive Board member of the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, a membership-based professional association for practitioners dedicated to creating more inclusive, equitable, and just campuses for LGBTQIA2S+ people and communities. I am a PhD student in the Michigan State University Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education program. My research focuses on LGBTQIA2S+ people in U.S. higher education, with a focus on gender and sexuality resource centers and critical organizational theory. I embrace a transformative research paradigm and am interested in producing research and scholarship that creates change. This chapter represents the evolution of my scholarly work in my program, as well as the current direction of my future dissertation.

I am white, a U.S. citizen, upper-middle class, disabled, nonbinary, queer, fat, and in my early 40s. I am a parent and a partner. As a former high school dropout, I have found my journey through higher education to be personally liberating. My experiences as an undergraduate student at the University of Texas Gender and Sexuality Center (GSC) had a profound positive impact on me personally and professionally—both due to my peers and the staff of the GSC. I hold this to be true while also understanding how HEIs have and continue to cause grievous harm to marginalized people. I have experienced this harm firsthand. I come to this organizational analysis of GSRCs as a champion of GSRCs and a critic. I cherish (most of) my experience in higher education and desire to hold institutions accountable for the ways they cause harm and are (re)productive of systems of power and oppression.

CONTEXT: GENDER AND SEXUALITY RESOURCE CENTERS IN U.S. POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION⁴

The first campus GSRC was founded at the University of Michigan in 1971 as the Human Sexuality Office and was staffed by two quarter-time employees (Bazarsky et al., 2015; Catalano & Jourian, 2018; Fine, 2012; Marine, 2011; Sanlo, 2000; Sanlo et al., 2002). Many gender and sexuality resource centers (GSRCs) came into existence as the result of student activism and organizing on college and university campuses (Catalano & Jourian, 2018; Duran et al., 2022; Garvey et al., 2017; Lange, 2019; Marine, 2011; McCoy, 2018). Other centers were developed following a campus climate task force, while still others were created after an incident of harassment or discrimination against LGBTQ+ students (Ritchie & Banning, 2001). There are currently over 300 professionally staffed GSRCs across the over 4,000 higher education institutions in the United States (Catalano & Jourian, 2018; Consortium of Higher Education

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