

Genie Nicole Giaimo. *Unwell Writing Centers: Searching for Wellness in Neoliberal Educational Institutions and Beyond*. Utah State University Press, 2023.

Liliana M. Naydan
Penn State Abington

How emotionally, psychologically, and physically well are writing center workers in any given writing center? How do or might writing center administrators support the wellness of peer and professional staff who report to them? Additionally, how might writing center staff support one another through conversation? These questions are at the heart of Genie Nicole Giaimo's timely and thought-provoking recent book, *Unwell Writing Centers: Searching for Wellness in Neoliberal Educational Institutions and Beyond* (2023). Giaimo critiques shallow, neoliberal approaches to assuring that employees are well. And they explore radical and transformative approaches to supporting wellness that effectively equip writing center professionals to address everything from everyday stress to major campus-wide or national emergencies.



LILIANA M. NAYDAN

Published in the wake of Covid-19 and the murder of George Floyd, amid a seemingly endless stream of disturbing news reports of gun violence on college campuses and beyond, Giaimo's book conceptualizes wellness as a critical labor justice issue. They come into conversation with important works in writing and writing center studies such as Nicole I. Caswell et al.'s *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* (2016) and Courtney Adams Wooten, Jacob Babb, Kristi Murray Costello, and Kate Navickas's edited volume, *The Things We Carry: Strategies for Recognizing and Negotiating Emotional Labor in Writing Program Administration* (2020). And they give weighty and playful context to their argument about writing center work through references to works such as Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007) and Kenny Rogers' "The Gambler."

But Giaimo is no hasty gambler themselves, as they tell us near the end of the book. Instead, they're a meticulous and markedly reflective researcher who is invested in paving the way for more work on wellness. In their book, Giaimo reports on results from a longitudinal study and wellness program. And they interweave their own personal experiences with these results, most notably by discussing their working-class roots on Staten Island, their navigation of higher education as a first-generation college student, and their survival of an active shooter emergency at Ohio State University in fall 2016. They argue that "[o]ur field has a wellness problem, perhaps because our society does too" (8). In Giaimo's words, their book "offers a deep analysis of occupationally specific phenomena that arise in writing center work" to support writing center professionals who may feel unprepared for the job of cultivating meaningful wellness initiatives (11).

Written in three parts, *Unwell Writing Centers* explores the history, efficacy, and future of wellness programs. Part I: Searching for Wellness, consists of three chapters. Chapter One: "Writing Centers and the History of Workplace Wellness Programs" reports on the results of surveys that measured tutors' attitudes toward wellness trainings, and it also provides a history of the wellness

work we see in our places of employment today. Giaimo traces contemporary wellness initiatives back to the positive psychology movement, which ignored systemic power imbalances that inhibit wellness and which was coopted by the business world and subsequently by neoliberal institutions of higher education. Wellness, as many of us know it today, involves, for instance, readily deletable emails about “Wellness Wednesday” and the image of the shrewd ad executive Don Draper doing yoga in the series finale of *Mad Men*. And it exists as it does because of this co-opting. But wellness is salvageable, as Giaimo indicates in the rest of their book, beginning with Chapter Two: “Uncovering and Addressing Workplace Stress in the Writing Center.” In this chapter, Giaimo challenges the notion that we should focus on the stress levels of writing center clients by focusing instead on the range of different stressors that might affect tutors, among them workload, job insecurity, social challenges, and sexual harassment, to name just a few. A survey they distributed found that ordinary stressors as opposed to national or campus emergencies most inhibit peer tutors’ experiences at work. In Chapter Three: “Conducting Wellness Research and Assessments in Writing Center Studies,” the final chapter of the first part of *Unwell Writing Centers*, Giaimo humanizes writing center research by detailing approaches to understanding the feelings and anxieties that tutors bring with them to work. Dubbed the most useful chapter of the book by Elizabeth H. Boquet in her foreword, this chapter provides details about Giaimo’s research process and designs that might serve as a model for similar work. These details address survey design, interview design, and approaches to conducting analysis.

Part II of *Unwell Writing Centers*, titled Finding Wellness Interventions that Work, consists of two chapters. In the first of these, Chapter Four: “Incorporating Mindfulness into Intentional Tutoring Practice and Policy,” Giaimo explores the Zen Buddhist origins of mindfulness and Jon Kabat-Zinn’s role in popularizing the practice in the United States through the establishment of the Center for Mindfulness, Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts. Based on tutors’ responses to a survey on their engagement with mindfulness trainings Giaimo conducted in the writing center, Giaimo proposes that writing center administrators should make mindfulness optional and allow for critique of it for tutors to benefit most from the practice. In turn, in Chapter Five: “Emergency Planning and Risk Assessment in the Writing Center,” which is one of the most useful chapters in the book, in my opinion, Giaimo applies the premium that writing centers put on collaboration to emergency planning, which involves providing instructions for safety and survival in events like the 9/11 terrorist attack, Hurricane Katrina, and the Virginia Tech shooting. Giaimo points out problems with blanket instructions to call the police, who might pose a threat to Black tutors, as well as potentially confounding directives to *run, hide, fight*, a now standard directive. Giaimo argues that emergency planning for any campus and writing center should be a collaborative process akin to tutoring. It should involve a range of stakeholders to promote inclusion and understanding. Giaimo, too, argues that processing emergencies after they conclude is just as important as preparing for them.

The final part of the book, Part III: Looking to the Future of Wellness Work, includes two chapters that explore the relationship between minoritized and historically marginalized workers and wellness work. In Chapter Six: “Toward an Intersectional Praxis of Emotional Labor,” Giaimo provides a brilliant interrogation of the history and meaning of emotional labor, tracing the term back to Arlie Hochschild’s *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1979). Giaimo explains the three criteria for labor to count as emotional in Hochschild’s view. According to Hochschild, the worker performing the emotional labor must 1) be public-facing, 2) have responsibility over employees’ affective labor, and 3) have an expectation to produce an emotion in their audience. Giaimo explains astutely that tutors conduct emotional labor because they’re expected “to produce good feeling” in writing center clients, and if they struggle to do so, they

may experience feelings such as anxiety, guilt, or shame (110). Without “clear workplace expectations and protective policies,” Giaimo posits, tutors—particularly those who are marginalized—run the risk of burning out (116). The final chapter of Part III, Chapter Seven: “Locating Wellness in Black Liberation Social Movements,” is yet another gem in Giaimo’s book. In it, they explore the relationship between wellness and systemic oppression, particularly oppression based on race and gender. They juxtapose neoliberal models for wellness with a radical Black feminist understanding of self-love and self-care that scholars such as Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks theorize. According to Giaimo, writing centers, which are historically white and middle-class spaces, should embrace radical Black feminist self-love and self-care, which promote “sustainable, politically engaged, and BIPOC-focused wellness” (120). In the contemporary world, these kinds of self-love and self-care are evident in initiatives such as GirlTrek and Body Politic. As Giaimo explains, echoing arguments that Jackie Grutsch McKinney makes in *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers* (2013), tutors with marginalized identities don’t see writing centers as inherently safe or welcoming, and writing center administrators thus have a responsibility to engage in antiracist wellness interventions that pervade professional development and writing center policy-making.

Giaimo’s brief conclusion reflects on the state of higher education in a late-stage capitalist context, arguing that engaging in radical as opposed to neoliberal wellness work is essential for writing center administrators and for tutors who would benefit from an increased focus on wellness. And Giaimo follows their conclusion with five appendices that provide readers with practical templates for assessment, emergency planning, and professional development activities.

Near the beginning of their book, Giaimo notes that this is a book they wish they had been handed “as a new writing center director or even a new graduate tutor,” and as I finished the relatively slim yet rich and enriching volume, I realized that I agree with Giaimo wholeheartedly (11). I wish I had been handed this book sooner, and I imagine other readers of it will have similar sentiments, particularly if, like me, they want to better equip themselves to handle emergencies or if they know little about wellness and would appreciate an opportunity to get their bearings. Indeed, upon reflection, I realize that Giaimo’s book names a concern that writing centers have danced around at conferences and in professional development for quite a while. And it provides readers with a foundation from which to build policies and practices that attend to the diverse intersectional identities of their writing centers’ inhabitants. Like Caswell et al.’s *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* (2016) and, more recently, Webster’s *Queerly Centered* (2021), Giaimo’s book effectively centers the workers who do the hard work that defines our discipline, and doing so allows Giaimo to give readers key tools they need to do our hard work well.

Through *Unwell Writing Centers*, Giaimo establishes themselves as a leading scholar of writing center labor. *Unwell Writing Centers* is a triumph that should be required reading for all writing center professionals who seek to mentor consultants responsibly. It’s a text born out of our fraught historical moment that brilliantly challenges the largely empty wellness initiatives that institutions have foisted upon workers who are struggling with everything from everyday stressors to major burnout. And with great scholarly care, it offers a way forward for more research about wellness as well as more meaningful wellness initiatives in writing centers.

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