

(Re)Producing (E)Motions: Motherhood, Academic Spaces, and Neoliberal Times

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Introduction

This collaborative writing between single mothers in Rhetoric and Composition (Rhet-Comp) began as an investigation into the working conditions of grad students in general. We five single mothers (Skye, Heather, Alejandra, Alex, and April) are, or were recently, active graduate students often in the minority for different reasons including being of color, low income, first generation, and other marginalizations. To tell our story, we use polyvocal style to reflect both our academic voice as well as our collective voice. Our writing process includes Zoom meetings, where we talk about the possibilities and limitations to technology in our teaching, collaborating, and parenting. Our kids want to be on screen and see who we are talking to, smile, and say hi! When we are reading or writing, they may be playing Playstation or Leap Frog or watching cartoons. We are in Tennessee, Arizona, New York, Europe, Virginia, and Arkansas. We find solace in our mutual lived experiences, and our minority status in the field and institution, as single mothers, especially given the limited consideration of such experiences in Rhet-Comp scholarship¹.

In this article, we argue that neoliberalism has created an academic culture particularly unfriendly to single-mother graduate students in Rhet-Comp. We explore how our day-to-day practices enable us to participate in an institutional system not designed for us, the strategies and tactics we implement to complete our work, and how academic institutions, programs, and organizations can better support single-mother graduate students and others who do not fit the nuclear, heteronormative, familial structure that is most often imagined in developing family-friendly policies and practices.

Neoliberalism and Ideal Worker Norms

When graduate students forsake their health to take extra responsibilities, we feed into productivity culture—much like the professors who urge us to never turn down an opportunity. This expression of neoliberal values is implicit, sometimes masked as “trying to stay competitive” among the field, but it represents the impact of productivity culture.

¹ To date, there is no scholarship that considers the experiences of single-mother graduate students in Rhet-Comp, and very little that considers the experiences of single mothers in the field. The exceptions are Cucciare et al. (2011) and Vieira (2018).

We love what we do, but at different times our work in the field comes with reliance on technology, flexibility in our lives, support from those around us, including our departments and faculty, and outside work from spaces beyond our academic institutions to bridge the pay gap between our graduate student salaries and cost of living.

Juggling single mothering and research quite often means we plan and do more with less time, which challenges us to problem solve and improvise in order to create opportunities for ourselves in a space that has not been welcoming to the visibility of the sexual, (re)productive, lactating female body and her familial life. As single-mother graduate students, we work against stigmas of single motherhood in the neoliberal academy to prove ourselves as dedicated, capable, and innovative scholars.

Neoliberal ideologies inform assumptions about what makes an academic. According to Vazquez and Levin (2018), the preferred traits of academic workers are mental flexibility, competitive nature (not just with others but themselves), an entrepreneurial spirit, adaptability to precarious environments, and the ability to remain emotionally detached. These values are communicated implicitly in hiring committees and graduate recruitment, where productivity receives its due reward. However, who is left out when our measure of success is based on productivity?

Maintaining these neoliberal assumptions about the ideal graduate student means academic institutions often miss out on the strengths of single mothers! The five of us are in different time zones, but we are all awake by 6 a.m., and the first things on our minds (unless we were also dreaming of them!) are our children, our dissertations, writing projects, and side hustles. As emergent domestic intellectuals (Juffer, 2006), we have our schedules, alarms, and writing spaces sharpened, rehearsed, and repeated hundreds of times over the course of a typical day. By 9 a.m. we have all eaten breakfast, gotten our seven children dressed, checked and responded to urgent emails, got some dissertation writing in, commuted (approximately an hour), dropped our kids off at their schools, and arrived on campus ready to teach.

Ideal worker norms are based on the assumptions that the worker is always available, working, and childless, or has a spouse at home taking care of family obligations (Hochschild, 1989). Single mothers cannot embody the idealized neoliberal worker narrative. Like so many marginalized within the profession, they represent cogs in the machine who cannot/will not turn in unison; whose identities run counter to the ever-present demand for productivity. Because single mothers cannot dedicate themselves solely to work, they are seen as a problem for institutions built from idealized worker norms.

Williams' (2000) research focuses on the impacts these ideal worker norms have on women who are mothers in the workplace, particularly because these norms ignore the societal expectations placed on mothers and cause work-life imbalance. Her research can certainly be applied to the struggles of single-mother graduate students, who do not have a spouse at home to cover family obligations (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012; Williams, 2000). Given that single-mother graduate students in Rhet-Comp are often teaching multiple sections of required, writing-intensive courses accompanied by substantial grading loads and one-on-one conferences, they are especially overworked, marginalized and vulnerable, as recognized by Nora et al. (2017).

Comments from our colleagues: *"How do you do it?!"*; *"I don't have kids so I have nothing to hold me back"*; *"I know you're busy with your kids and making dinner or whatever"*; *"I know what it's like to be a single mother, my husband is out of town for the weekend"*; *"You can just bring your kid with you to [insert non-kid-friendly academic event here]"*

Comments from our faculty and mentors: *"The grantor wants to know you can get the research done, but with kids, well, you do the math"*; *"But what else are you doing [besides teaching, writing, and coursework] to contribute?"*; *"You're missing out on networking at the conference"*; *"You can be a great instructor or a great mother, but you cannot be both at the same time."*

Comments from publishers: *"What about single fathers?"*

Thoughts to ourselves: *"I can't let anyone know I have kids yet... I didn't even include it in my grad school application"*; *"I have more important things to do than go to the holiday party"*; *"I don't need your sympathy."*

Comments from other single-mom grad students: *"I work better in collaboration"*; *"I constantly have to choose where my energy is going to go—my kids, my students, my service, or my writing, and usually, my writing comes last."*

Given that higher education is designed based on ideal worker norms, single-mother graduate students find themselves wrongly labelled as "bad subjects," and are seen as being less committed, less serious, and more invested in their family than their academic work (Vera-Rosas, 2019, p. 71). This is compounded by notions of "intensive mothering," or the ideology that a good mother is someone entirely devoted to their child(ren) at the expense of everything else in their lives (Hays, 1996). Not only are single mothers marginalized and vulnerable, they also experience pressure in their lives as a result of what it means to be an ideal student and ideal mother; the social and cultural expectations and assumptions around these two roles make them seem incongruent, creating a situation that is not designed for the benefit of single mothers.

Such misperceptions and lack of consideration for single mothers in America's colleges and universities create a situation where single moms are navigating a higher education system that is not designed for them, much like what Fischer, Rosche, and McCool (2020) describe regarding the female graduate student identity and experience. Given this, it's not surprising that "Graduate student mothers are at a higher risk of attrition than almost any other group in American universities" (Ellis & Gullion, 2015, p. 153). If graduate-student single mothers are pushed out or continue to be marginalized, higher education loses the voices and perspectives of an entire group of women. These women provide valuable insights and contributions to their fields and disciplines of study, as well as create change in academia to better support people of various identities (Huff, Hampson, & Tagliarina, 2012). The attrition of graduate-student single mothers not only hurts them, it hurts higher education as a whole.

Actionable Task List

Connected to the retention of single-mother graduate students in Rhet-Comp are practices and means of support that facilitate our work in the field. While we have received comments from colleagues, faculty, and mentors that cause us to take pause and consider how we fit in higher education, we have also experienced moments of encouragement, as well as the implementation of programs and activities that create a more welcoming, supportive environment for single mothers in academia. Other important factors like changing technologies have allowed for single mothers to successfully complete graduate programs in recent years. From our own experiences with these changes and the positive impacts they have had on our abilities to succeed as Rhet-Comp graduate students, we consider actions that have been or could be taken by people in power to better support single-mother graduate students. Like Fischer, Rosche, and McCool (2020), we call on those in positions of power to advocate, interrupt, and resist as a way to create institutional change. We offer the list below as a starting point for creating family-friendly environments in Rhet-Comp at the departmental, programmatic, and institutional level that give consideration to a range of familial structures. We end with this list as a way to begin and create space for greater conversations about actions that can be taken to resist neoliberal ideologies in higher education while also working towards greater inclusivity:

- Offer flexible teaching schedules that account for when we need to teach (allow later and/or earlier courses)
- Cap writing courses taught by graduate teaching assistants to make grading manageable (<20 students)
- Develop departmental policies or resources that allow for alternative methods of grading like video and audio comments
- Allow the option for student writing conferences to take place via video chat
- Offer online teaching and/or course releases for a more flexible schedule with priority given to single moms

- Support research that considers the experiences of single mothers in higher education in Rhet-Comp publications, conferences, and graduate student research projects
- Utilize “distant student” or telecommuting. Provide the options to video chat into meetings or coursework, including conversations with dissertation chairs and committee members or professional development sessions (Sallee, 2016)
- Schedule courses and extracurriculars during business hours (9 a.m. to 5 p.m.)
- Provide institutional support for childcare. For example, Michigan State University offers childcare for \$225 a semester; Syracuse University offers a childcare subsidy for \$1,000 up to two children under the age of 6; other schools like UW Tacoma, University of Pennsylvania, and UC Berkeley offer childcare subsidies of varying amounts
- Offer optional health insurance coverage for dependents that can be paid through stipends and/or aid disbursements
- Provide living-wage stipends including consistent funding for summer
- Offer fellowships and course releases that give priority to underrepresented populations, especially single mothers
- Consider displaying artwork from children and/or having family photos in your office
- Create family-friendly events for graduate students to help better integrate them into the community (Sallee, 2016)
- Have clearly articulated syllabi policies that give consideration to student caregivers
- Ensure that department and program chairs are knowledgeable about resources for parents at their respective institutions

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