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APP STATE GRADUATE TURNS PERSONAL JOURNEY INTO COMMUNITY BUILDING THROUGH ZINES

BOONE, N.C. – Moving between tables at 3rd Place, a local community space, Cara Miller helps members of The Queer Sphere, a safe queer community for all LGBTQ+ in the area, build their personal zines. The Wednesday evening workshop buzzes with the energy of creation: scissors cutting, glue sticks clicking, and conversations flowing as participants transform discarded materials into personal publications.



Miller, a spring 2025 graduate of Appalachian State University, designed her own degree program around this very practice of queer zines and community organizing, turning a personal passion into academic expertise.

“It feels like the energy of a third-grade art class, but with the kind of intentionality of a grad school or something,” Miller said, describing her approach to facilitating these community zine workshops. “I think that’s kind of my vibe, that I am playful and not too serious. But also, if you really go into it, there’s a reason for all of this stuff.”

The Queer Sphere represents a reimagining of campus LGBTQ+ organizations that once operated at Appalachian State University before institutional changes pushed them off campus. Miller joined many others in response to Hurricane Helene, creating a resource for the queer community in Boone.

Following statewide diversity, equity and inclusion cuts and rollbacks, organizations like the Sexuality and Gender Alliance or TransActions, safe queer spaces on campus, were removed by their individual founders. The Queer Sphere strives to fill that void. “We’re trying to be fully shaped by our members and sort of fluid with our leadership, just anyone who’s able to contribute,” Miller explains about how the group functions.

Miller’s path to community organizing began with academic rejection. When her graphic design portfolio failed to pass review at App State, she found herself at a crossroads that would ultimately reshape both her education and her understanding of herself.

“I was already a non-traditional student who transferred, who had trouble getting into art credits my first semester. So, I just felt like I was on borrowed time,” Miller said. “Like I wasn’t going to graduate at the point I needed to if I extended my graphic design major.”

Instead of retaking classes or switching to a conventional major, Miller found Interdisciplinary Studies, a program that allows students to design their own curriculum. What emerged was a degree focused on queer zines, those self-published, photocopied publications that have served as vital communication tools for marginalized communities for decades.

“I use my academic career to figure out the stuff I go through. But it’s also been such a structured way of orienting myself to have projects that always push me forward, I think, to the next place in my life that I feel like I need to go,” Miller said.

Miller’s academic focus on zines wasn’t arbitrary. These small-circulation publications carry significant historical weight, particularly for LGBTQ+ communities. Her research traced their roots back to the Harlem Renaissance, when Black writers and artists like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston contributed to publications like “Fire” after being shut out of mainstream publishing.

“Why zines are really, really important for queer people. Why it’s important that they are self-made and repurpose materials that reflect exactly who made it,” Miller said. “It’s all just led by the people, and not made to primarily build capital or plug in with corporations.”

The medium resonated with Miller on multiple levels. As she navigated her own gender identity journey during college, zines offered both a subject of academic study and a tool for personal expression. Her culminating project for the degree, “Estra-Punk,” was crafted from medication boxes and explored themes of transition and identity through the parodic language of pharmaceutical packaging.

Reflecting on the intersection of her personal growth and academic exploration, Miller realized, “My personality, it wasn’t introversion, it was gender dysphoria.” She added, “I feel like I’ve unleashed this part of me that’s like, ‘I need to be around people all the time.’ I don’t think I was ever actually introverted.”

Those academic foundations now inform Miller’s community work. Key classes shaped her interdisciplinary approach, such as Andrew Bailey Arend’s “Art for Social

Change,” which provided hands-on experience with zine creation. At the same time, courses with Dr. Emily Lutenski covered queer theory and feminist theory. Isla Prouty’s “Facilitation Skills for Creative Projects” taught Miller how to share creative processes with others, skills she now applies weekly at The Queer Sphere.

“The pace and the deadlines... But still having the loose structure was good for me. Because I feel like that’s what I’m dealing with on a regular basis. With my personal zine projects and then just work in general,” Miller said about how interdisciplinary studies prepared her for post-graduation life.

Now Miller is packaging those facilitation skills learned in her courses professionally, seeking opportunities to lead workshops at camps, festivals and community events across the South. She plans to attend zine festivals in North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia, building networks that extend her vision of what she calls “the queer South.”

The Queer Sphere serves as a testing ground for these larger ambitions. Weekly meetings include skill shares, special interest presentations, hikes and needs assessments. Miller collaborates with Emma Hancock at the Plemmons Student Union’s Looking

Glass Gallery to maintain a zine library, where “Estra-Punk” was featured in the App Prints exhibit.

“We do skill shares. There’s a workshop we did where one table was zine stuff and another had sewing stuff. And so we’re trying to make that accessible. If you have something you want to share with other people to be creative or to be more self-reliant, anything like that, we want to have that provided in our community,” Miller said.

For students considering unconventional academic paths,



Miller offers practical advice drawn from her interdisciplinary experience. She recommends getting involved in activities both related to and separate from academic interests, emphasizing the importance of maintaining perspective and building diverse communities.

“Get involved with something that can demonstrate that you’re growing depth within your academics. With the thing that you’re forming and making. But also, get involved with something that has nothing to do with it,” Miller said. “Find some time to just be a person.”

Miller’s journey from rejected portfolio to community organizer illustrates how academic setbacks can become opportunities for innovation. Her interdisciplinary degree, which combined personal exploration with scholarly rigor, has created expertise that now serves communities across the region.

“I had an unconventional path in college. And I’m planning on having an unconventional or unconventional life. I think, out of necessity. So I think I’m prepared. I feel very independent and autonomous,” Miller said.

As participants at 3rd Place finish their zines and pack up their materials, Miller’s vision becomes clear. Academic innovation and community building aren’t separate pursuits; they’re interconnected ways of creating spaces where people can explore identity, share skills and resist isolation through the simple act of making something together.