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Moving From Implicit to Explicit: Talking Culture and Justice in a Writing for Non-Profits Certificate

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Abstract. Our institution's Writing for Non-Profits certificate program, which developed out of long-term partnerships with area non-profit programs in our predominantly Hispanic community, initially appeared to be an ideal vehicle for social justice. However, interviews with our Hispanic students showed us that, although the program effectively engaged students with the community, students were not making connections with larger issues of social justice taking place in the discipline of technical communication and the nation. After reviewing conversations on social justice within technical communication, particularly at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), we describe an IRB-approved interview study that critically examines our program and the opportunities it presents for deeply engaged social justice work for students. We conclude that, although social justice orientations may be implicit in the program and its design, this orientation needs to be made explicit, and we propose actions that can be made to improve such programs. We conclude by noting the disciplinary implications for social justice that can be had by deeply listening to minority students' perspectives.

Keywords: Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Latinx Students, Non-Profit Writing, Program Design, Service Learning, Social Justice

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Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi's (TAMU-CC) Writing for Non-Profits (WNPR) certificate program, which has community engagement as a core value, was built in response to needs of our predominantly Hispanic[1] community. Additionally, we know our students value the opportunity to participate in curricular work that engages them in their communities. The WNPR is a 16-hour program aligning closely with topics and courses that characterize the "burgeoning core" of minors and certificates in technical communication (Melonçon, 2012, p. 213). Students in the WNPR program take the following courses to enhance a combination of rhetorical, technological, genre, and social literacies:

- Technical and Professional Writing
- Document Design and Publishing
- Writing for the Web
- Grants and Proposals
- Writing in the Non-Profit Agencies
- Non-Profit Writing Project (a single-credit-hour capstone designed to be taken concurrently with the student's last course in the certificate)

The certificate's first iteration, launched in 2016, was 12 hours and did not include Writing for the Web or the Writing Project capstone.

Five years after the initial launch of this program, we wanted to assess to see if it does what we intend it to. We conducted a study of our students to learn how they experienced the program and what, if any, value they got out of it. Reviewing the spreading conversations around social justice and antiracism in the last few years, our assumption was that the program was inherently organized around social justice work because it grew out of the lifelong commitments and community coalition-building of the faculty who created it; we similarly assumed students would see tons of connections between work done throughout courses in the program to contemporary discussions of social justice in the news and in our academic disciplines. What we learned is that the program prepares students for work in the non-profit world, but that we have missed opportunities to discuss critical social justice issues. Our response had to this point been tactical—when identifying poverty and seeking to address it and other social challenges facing our community, we have worked on ways to address immediate needs (Mathieu, 2005), and haven't examined why certain groups are more vulnerable to these injustices, nor have we addressed the structural inequalities that perpetuate these injustices. And as the faculty who designed the program have retired or begun to shift out of administrative roles and new faculty have come in, we learned how the commitments and strategies we thought were built into the program were really only manifested on individual levels and were not sustained programmatically. We concluded that we need to make explicit what is implicit, that we need to build conversations about justice into our course design, and that we need to do more to address racial injustices that are present for a number of reasons, especially disciplinary but also because the program is delivered through asynchronous online courses.

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[1] As we drafted this paper, we were reminded by our colleague Yndalecio Hinojosa of how preferred terms and re-designations by researchers are often acts of covert violence. Which word would we use to identify students? Latina? Latinx? Something else? Recent scholarship in technical communication and writing studies that we reviewed prefers the intersectional *Latinx*, while older scholarship has used Latina/o. In our IRB documentation we used *Latina* in the title and study goals, although we did not use any demographic language or preferred terminology in interviews or recruitment materials, allowing students to self-identify. For this study we have chosen to use *Hispanic* when we talk about our participants because that is how the majority of them identified themselves in their interviews. We also use *Hispanic* when talking about students from a general perspective, to remain consistent with demographic terminology and the Hispanic Serving Institution designation. We use Latinx as a keyword to speak to current scholarship in technical communication. Gonzales et al. (2020) provide an insightful discussion of the semantic and cultural distance between Latinx and Hispanic.

Introduction

In the final section of *Technical Communication after the Social Justice Turn: Building Coalitions for Action*, the phrase "after all" appears 10 times. Perhaps not especially conspicuous spread out over two chapters, but enough to be noticeable. "After" is a small word. Nothing fancy. But in picking open competing senses of the word, we are led to wonder what "after the turn" means. In a temporal sense, some might see the field in the time following the turn—the turn has been made, and scholars in Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) are oriented towards the work of problem-solving at sites of injustice. However incompletely and imperfectly, attention is there. In another and more important sense, the field is behind the turn, chasing it. There is much undone and much to do. For both a temporal and spatial sense, we must be able to imagine, as Rebecca Walton et al. (2019) have done, the kinds of work that must happen after the turn. It would be easy to say that the social justice turn for scholarship, teaching, and programmatic conversations in TPC has been well documented and clearly articulated (Walton et al., 2019), as has the field's discussion of diversity (Savage & Matveeva, 2011). On top of that, as Laura Gonzales et al. (2020) pointed out, there has been more than 15 years of work highlighting the challenges and successes for TPC programs at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) as they continue to articulate how localization and other curricular strategies present opportunities for further orienting our field and our programs to social justice, antiracism, and diversity. After all this work, the need for more work continues. There is more turning yet.

This research article describes how we (the outgoing and incoming administrators of an undergraduate WNPR certificate and Technical and Professional Writing minor at a regional majority-minority HSI) took on student interviews as part of program assessment and how that grew out into larger work centered around social justice and inclusion in our academic programs. We then share our strategies for mediating white supremacist elements of our program: by listening to our students and working toward installing a more inclusive environment programmatically and coalitionally rather than just at a tactical level. A localized participatory approach (Agboka, 2013) is especially necessary for us as a pair of white, male professors in a discipline that is historically given to ignoring racial and justice issues. First, we trace conversations about localization and responsive pedagogy on TPC programs, especially in the HSI context. Then we describe how we gathered data and discuss how students perceive and experience the program, and how students think of our Writing for Non-Profits program specifically regarding inclusion, culture, and community. We close echoing Chris Dayley's (2021) call to action for program administrators and explaining the moves we have begun to make to be more intentional and explicit about antiracist orientations in the program, specifically: how we are working to go beyond tactical solutions and the urgency of the immediate and to implement structural actions.

Conversations

In a series of collaborative works, Rebecca Walton and Godwin Y. Agboka (2021) and Walton et al. (2019) have thoroughly described a two-decade social justice turn in TPC scholarship. Throughout that period, scholarship in TPC has pointed to service learning and community engagement as an opportunity to help students learn and practice civic engagement (Bourelle 2014; Cargile Cook, 2015; Dubinsky, 2002; Hea & Shah, 2016). At the same, we recognize that this attention to ethics and civic engagement so frequently evoked by white scholars and teachers—such as ourselves—does not by default translate to social justice. Social justice is an active practice and ongoing disposition (Walton et al., 2017) that "amplifies the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, politically, and/or economically under-resourced" (Jones & Walton, 2018, p. 242) as well as "actively verifying the equality of individuals and communities in any context" (Walton et al., 2016, p. 120). A pedagogical emphasis on social justice investigates how TPC does this work and how "to equip the next generation of technical communication scholars and practitioners for the complex work of recognizing, acting within, and shaping issues of social justice and diversity" (Jones & Walton, 2018, p. 242).

Localization has been a frequently-cited framework for articulating and meeting social justice goals through its "emphasis on contexts, situatedness, and locality" (Agboka, 2013, p. 29). Importantly, localization cannot stop at considering the linguistic and cultural factors of location but also ideology, economy, and ethics dimensions of a locale (Agboka, 2013). Thus, it is important for us to consider our own location, context, and situatedness at an HSI, and to center our conversations on "servingness" as we engage in examining social justice action in our curriculum (Garcia, 2019). We see this emphasis as a kind of "localization as articulation" (Leon & Enríquez-Loya, 2019), which frames (and names) "elements of a writing program within the framework of HSIs, and specifically with the identity of its users in mind" (p. 162)—that is, we design "from here." We follow Kendall Leon and Aydé Enríquez-Loya's argument that TPC can be "a pivotal space where HSI as an identity can be articulated on a programmatic level" (2019, p. 163) and invoke our users—our students—as participants in thinking about the culture of our program and how the work they do in it may fit into larger conversations about inclusion, race, and justice. Research about TPC at HSIs points to intricate differences in the broad cultural categories that are otherwise obscured in homogeneous institutional labels like HSI (Baca et al., 2019; Gonzales & Baca 2017; Kells, 2007; Matveeva, 2015; Newman, 2007). Faculty must develop "culturally responsive pedagogy" that is based in the reality of students' lived experiences (Araiza et al., 2007, p. 93; also refer to Hinojosa & Zepeda, 2018), but they are often limited in doing so because faculty at such institutions may rely on prominent discourses about Hispanic students that do not accurately represent the reality of their students. For example, Isabel Araiza et al. (2007) typified this discourse as having an at-risk tone characterized by a strict profile for Hispanic students: 1st generation college students from low-income households who have less academic preparation and are less likely to complete college. This profile is extremely one-sided and does not capture the multidimensionality inside the homogenous label. As well, academic discourse about postsecondary Hispanic students frequently focuses on schools located closer to the U.S.-Mexico border, but not all HSI students experience borderlands in these geographically localized ways. Although the 170 miles between our city and the border cities of Estado Tamaulipas seems short (at least in terms of Texas driving distances), the border cultures of Paso

Del Norte or the Rio Grande Valley sometimes seem distant from the border culture of the Texas Coastal Bend.

A review of scholarship about TPC and HSIs shows a growing attention on how these and other types of minority-serving institutions can create meaningful and justice-oriented curricula and programs for students. Gonzales et al. (2020) aptly describe the ways that TPC programs at HSIs wrestle with commitments to inclusion, justice, and attention to HSI-ness. For a variety of reasons, faculty and programs do not frequently attend explicitly to their HSI designation and struggle to move beyond individual, small-scale efforts into system-level, programmatic changes. This is, according to Gina Ann Garcia (2019), a common fault among HSIs, which only must meet a demographic marker for the designation. TPC HSI scholars have highlighted several important strategies for creating and sustaining programs that are culturally and linguistically diverse and attenuated to justice for people from underrepresented backgrounds, including:

- highlighting inclusivity and racial/linguistic difference across courses, rather than working from a "diversity course" approach (Gonzales & Baca, 2017)
- approaching Latinx students from an assets-based framework that assumes students bring relevant work-related experiences to courses, know how to blur lines between expert and lay discourses, and understand the need for research and cultural sensitivity in TPC (Gonzales, 2019)
- emphasizing meaningful curriculum-community connections (Matveeva, 2015), including work such as: making community-building and engagement part of program outcomes and learning objectives (Leon & Enríquez-Loya, 2019), ensuring curriculum-community connections are transparent and intrinsically linked (Leon & Enríquez-Loya, 2019), and developing training for faculty in building community partnerships (Gonzales & Baca, 2017)

Gonzales et al. (2020) attended to how programs are being localized through a faculty perspective; in our study we attend to how students experience their program, and how they saw that experience intersecting with their cultural background and identity. We see this as a participatory approach, which can be essential to justice-oriented work (Agboka, 2013; Jones, 2016). In the following section, we describe how we used an interview methodology as a way of amplifying student narratives and perspectives, which is a way for us to localize our program through listening.

Current conversations concerning the seeming incommensurability of capitalist logics and social justice in the "deeply pragmatic" field of TPC (Phelps, 2021, p. 204; also refer to Hashlamon & Teston, 2021) are also relevant as we grapple with our own neoliberal rhetoric of job preparation in the WNPR program. Miriam F. Williams and Octavio Pimentel described how TPC, alongside so many parts of American society, is rooted in "the belief of a merit-based system of reward and penalty" that "rarely works to the advantage of people of color" (2012, p. 272). This false ideology has led to what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva called "color-blind[2] racism," (2014, p. 2) which can be defined as "a set of ideologies and discourses that uphold contemporary racial inequality by denying either its presence or its significance" (Burke, 2017, p. 272), or what Leon and Enríquez-Loya have described as the "imperialist tradition" (2019, p. 857) of TPC programs and discourses positing themselves as neutral. Our own WNPR certificate was created in the moment of an institutional rush to create job-relevant certificates across the university, and the color-evasive ideology informing that rush is passed along to students via our program's appeals to direct job preparation and workplace applications. In his survey of student perceptions of diversity in TPC programs, Dayley (2019) showed how his results may have been limited by students' acceptance of this type of "colorblind meritocracy" (p. 65). Persons who have enrolled and found success in programs already may "have found ways to navigate white-dominated spaces" (Dayley, 2019, p. 67) and may resist narratives about race and diversity that they see as radical. In adopting interviews to invite students to narrate their experiences, we hoped to gain insight into the challenges our students face and perhaps push back against color-evasive portrayals.

Methods

This project started in May 2019 as an outgrowth of our program assessment; we wanted to understand who our students were, why they were attracted to the program, and what their experiences were like in it. Beyond that, we wanted to understand how students from underserved populations and from cultural backgrounds other than our own experienced our online program. How do their identities and experiences as Hispanics, as women, as immigrants or children of immigrants, as working class, contribute to their experience of the program? We selected interviews as a method because we saw them as an opportunity for the students who use the program to contribute to its continued iterative design. By volunteering, people become participants; by saying "yes, we want to add our story to your project," participants contribute a part of themselves as "user[s]-in-community" (Agboka, 2013, p 42). It is one thing to say one is student-centered and design programs that are based in what one perceives to be student needs. It is another thing to talk to students, to hear their needs, to complicate the monolith of "students" or "Hispanics." This is doubly so considering our own positionalities in relation to theirs. While interviews don't fully bring users into the center of the design process, centering their experiences and seeking their knowledge helps us as administrators reflect on and change our own attitudes.

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[2] We acknowledge that the terms "color-blind racism" and "colorblind meritocracy" have ableist connotations, both of which convey abstract liberalism's attempts to divorce politics from race in an attempt to support the fiction we now live in a "post-racial" society. However, the phrase "color-blindness" is commonly used in relevant scholarship, and we have cited that term here. The term "color-evasiveness," coined by Annamma et al. (2017) is preferable, and we rely on it for our own usage.

Hearing our students' individual perspectives allows us to recognize intricate differences in the broad cultural categories of Latino, Latina, Chicanx, Hispanic, and border(ed) people without falling back on quasi-Freirean constructs that frame white HSI instructors and Hispanic students as "liberators" and "oppressed" (Newman, 2007, p. 19). By interviewing our students and moving beyond reliance on anecdote and standard assessments like course surveys and evaluations, we engaged in four capacities of narrative: fostering identification, facilitating reflexivity, interrogating historicity, and understanding context (Jones & Walton, 2018). We learn more about the peculiar context of our programs, our community, our HSI, and our online TPC program.

Recruitment and Participants

We worked with university staff to collect a complete list of declared certificate students in order to identify both graduates and current students in the WNPR Certificate program; we compiled a list of 28 students (the certificate was launched in 2016). To participate in the study, interviewees must have either graduated with their declared certificate or had completed the course sequence as described in the university's catalog. Working from our list of graduates and current students we identified a list of 12 possible participants. We sent each student personalized email invitations to participate in informal interviews about their experiences in the program with the goal of continuing to develop and grow it—that is, we explicitly invited them to participate in the future redesign and revision of the program.

Seven of the 12 students we invited agreed to be interviewed as part of this study. All participants were provided the basic questions of the study via email beforehand and signed an informed consent at the outset of each interview. Table 1 summarizes anonymized details about our seven participants; all demographic language is self-described by the interviewee. With a small sample made up of our own students, even working from numbered transcripts would not provide true anonymity; at the same time, to protect the information and identity of participants, all data and transcripts were de-identified. Of our seven participants, five were Hispanic women, one was a Hispanic male, and one was a White male. As discussed in greater detail in an earlier section, we purposefully avoided any specific demographic language or preferred terminology in interviews and recruitment materials, allowing students to self-identify during the interview. For this study we have chosen to use Hispanic when we talk about our participants because that is how the majority of them identified themselves in their interviews (see footnote 1).

Table 1. Participants' self-described demographic details

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Socioeconomic status	Originally from
Participant 1	M	Hispanic	low-income	Oaxaca, Mexico and Corpus Christi, TX
Participant 2	F	Hispanic	lower middle class	Corpus Christi, TX
Participant 3	M	White	middle class	not from Corpus Christi, TX
Participant 4	F	Chicana	working to middle class	North TX
Participant 5	F	Hispanic	middle class	Corpus Christi, TX as an adult
Participant 6	F	Hispanic	middle class	Corpus Christi, TX
Participant 7	F	White Hispanic	middle class	Austin, TX

Our participants' demographics are consistent with TAMU-CC's institutional demography. Hispanic students are, by far, the institution's largest demographic group, comprising 48.25% of enrollment. White or Caucasian students make up 37%.

Data Collection

All interviews were one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted by our research assistant, who met with each participant for approximately an hour at a variety of on-campus locations. While designing our study, we decided to employ[3] a graduate research assistant to conduct, record, and transcribe interviews; because we are faculty in the program and one or both of us knew all of our potential participants, we supposed participants might be more honest about the program with a separate interviewer. Research about ethnicity-of-interviewer effects suggested our Hispanic students would be more forthcoming if the interviewer were also Hispanic.[4]

We created an IRB-approved script of fifteen interview questions (provided in Appendix), and encouraged our research assistant to be flexible with how she organized and followed up on questions in our regular research meetings. Semi-structured interviews allow interviewees to follow tangents and tell stories as they respond broadly to interview questions, and let interviewers make connections and follow up in the moment of the interview—eliding a line of questioning if it becomes clear participants want to avoid it, or refining if participants are confused. In some sessions, our research assistant shared her own stories as a way of connecting with participants. In each case, participants retained the right to refuse to answer questions or change consent at any time during the study. Interviews were recorded with permission on a laptop computer and transcribed with oTranscribe, an HTML application that uses a computer's local storage instead of uploading files to the internet. All audio files were deleted after transcripts were finalized.

Data Analysis

As each transcript was completed, both of us would read them and

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[3] We gratefully acknowledge Kelsy Mascorro's work as a graduate research assistant collecting and transcribing interviews on this project. We were able compensate Kelsy for her work on this project; funding was provided from internal College Research Enhancement grant funding.

[4] "Ethnicity of interview effect" has been a topic of discussion since at least the mid-1980s. Put simply, in interview situations, interviewees feel more comfortable, are more responsive, and give more full answers if the interviewer is of the same ethnicity as the interviewee. Some examples include Reese et al. 1986 and van Bochove et al., 2015.

meet periodically to discuss patterns we noticed across interviews. After this initial holistic review, we relied on structural coding to identify key themes and answers to our research questions. Structural coding (Saldaña, 2013) is a question-based style of qualitative coding particularly effective for semi-structured protocols gathering information from multiple participants. We used the following six questions from our IRB proposal as prefigured indexing devices that allowed us to identify and focus on comparable segments:

- BENEFIT: What if any benefit have students derived from the courses they took in the program?
- DIFFERENT: In what ways do students in courses feel as if they are being read differently by students from backgrounds other than their own?
- DRAWS: What draws students to the program?
- IMPROVE: How could the program be improved?
- SKILLS: What skills do students develop in the program?
- SOCIAL: What social or socialization experiences do students have in the program?

Meeting regularly to compare notes, we began to notice emergent patterns that we hadn't been looking for; the results of our study were mixed, revealing some unexpected complications arising from the program's design as well as demonstrating some program strengths. The following section focuses on the three most relevant results.

- **Result One:** We were surprised to find that students didn't connect community and social justice issues with what they learned in the program or how the program benefitted them, but did talk about those topics extensively when asked about other topics. Each of the Hispanic students talked about how their community and their background influenced their choice of the program (and projects); the one white student didn't.
- **Result Two:** Students perceived the program as beneficial and primarily articulated its relevance to career advancement (and economic benefits associated with advancement), or placed a premium on skills developed in the program both in terms of learning new technology as well as new writing skills.
- **Result Three:** Students experienced the program primarily through instructors as individuals rather than as a programmatic whole or in relation to other students in the program. Often students did not view the program as an opportunity for professional collaboration but instead equated collaborative tasks more negatively, as "group work." They reported no differences in treatment from students from other backgrounds,

describing their online courses as largely gender- and culture-neutral.

These interviews revealed some of our students' goals, bits and pieces of their backgrounds, and how they connect those two things in our programs. These interviews also point us towards things we can highlight about the program and ways we can grow into a social justice mission, turning from implicit goals to explicit structures, stories, and work. While our students' stories don't point us towards generalizable claims about HSI students in technical communication programs everywhere, they do point us towards a road map for ourselves and for other programs to use for making social and cultural justice orientations more explicit—or making them real in the first place. In the Takeaways section below, we will discuss curricular strategies we are developing that respond to these findings.

Result One: Culture and Community

When asked how their cultural backgrounds influenced their experiences in the program, students had a nuanced response. Most respondents were Hispanic women, one was an immigrant from Mexico, at least one other was a child of Mexican immigrants. Students emphasized their backgrounds, families, and communities as part of their motivations for being in NPO work. And though some did not say culture had anything to do with it (especially the white male), other students talked about how their gender and background (growing up a child of immigrants or their experiences as a Chicana or Mexican woman) was motivation to do the work and added perspective on how to effectively write/labor for marginalized communities, despite this not being a part of instruction.

Some directly linked their cultural backgrounds to their motivations for joining the program. Participant One, who grew up in Corpus Christi's predominantly Hispanic West Side, participated in a project with the Corpus Christi Literacy Council (CCLC); her personal memories included her grandmother taking ESL classes. This participant said her work with this agency was "really important to me because it was something that I saw was really important in the community." She emphasized that the CCLC was "something I've seen my family benefit from, and I felt it was important for others to be able to participate in that." She expressed the belief that her cultural background placed her in a position to mediate between her own community and the non-profits intended to serve that community: "when I was writing for [the CCLC], I was able to write with them in mind, knowing their needs and knowing their- what they're looking for in order to facilitate that communication between the non-profit and the community." This participant expressly linked her cultural background to experiences in the program, and framed the results in positive terms. As a resident of Corpus Christi's West Side, her community background gave her special knowledge that she was able to utilize when writing for non-profit agencies, meeting a community need and providing information the agency needs. She went on to say that "my cultural background helped a lot" in other classes.

Other students expressed a nuanced view when discussing their backgrounds and possible links to their experiences in the program. Participant two, who self-identified her family background as "lower middle class" and, later, as "working class," stated that her background had no effect on her experience in the program. However, elsewhere, she stated that when she was engaged in a class project—in this case, grant writing—she asked "what is there for women? And what is there for minorities?" She did so, she stated, because "I felt like I was representing that." Later, she stated very clearly "that I'm … a woman and minority wanting to get out there in the community."

Participant four, who self-identified as a working-class Chicana, said her background did not affect her experience in the program. However, she created an interesting distinction: while she said background did not affect her experiences, she often "drew upon" her background in choosing her projects. She restated the importance of her Chicana identity[5] throughout the interview; at one point, she was trying to find visuals to use in a project, and notes:

> And I found this photo, and it was about- it was this woman, Chicana identifying. She had really long hair and she was walking, and that became my logo. Just really being able to imply- like shine through- the idea of a revolution, especially in the times that we're at in this moment, at the border.

She stated that "I want to take my knowledge and make it accessible to people so that they can change society in some way." Her experiences as a woman were another theme she referenced consistently as being a double-edged sword, as evidenced in the following passage:

> … women have a more detail-oriented- take a little more time to focus on it. And it's a little stereotypical, but also goes into how we're raised. The expectations of us to admire beauty and

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[5] We hesitate to interpret this participant's use of the term "Chicana" and were unable to follow up with her about it later. However, we acknowledge that to many individuals the choice to identify with the term "Chicano/a" has historically been a specifically political act. An excellent overview of the term, its explicit links to a politicized stance, and its use as a deliberate embrace of the pre-Hispanic, pre-colonial past can be found in activist-turned-political scientist José Ángel Gutiérrez (2011).

> to be beautiful. It's a double-edged kind of thing. It's like, "oh, you had that expectation forced upon you at birth. But now it's really helping you because you're a little more detail-oriented and you can really make something look pretty." So that was one thing. I am worried that in the field- not necessarily in the field of non-profits, but just trying to get money and stuff, it's a little harder for women to negotiate. Just because if they do, it's more seemed as a, "oh, this woman's demanding" as opposed to, "oh, this person knows their worth."

At other points in the interview, this participant made repeated indications that she was read differently as a woman, but that she perceived that difference as a strength.

Other participants expressed views similar to those expressed here—that their cultural background influenced their choice of projects, but that it did not affect their experience in the program. Participant 5, a middle-class Hispanic woman, noted that "the projects I picked were related to regional needs that may be underserved." However, she noted that, because she grew up "middle class," she had a "limited scope" of "what people experience." While she expressed a commitment to "the underserved" she attributed that to her work in the field of education as opposed to her own upbringing. She also noted that her gender never influenced her experience in the program because it was never "brought forward … by the professor or the student." She also said "I just feel like the courses themselves were- I wouldn't say gender neutral … I just never saw it. We never saw it, and I never myself put my gender in position to be used in a way to navigate the experience."

Participant Three, who self-identified as a white male, similarly indicated that he felt his background had no effect on his experience in the program. Like the other participants, he expressed a desire to do projects that benefit "the community" (not surprising since students who are drawn to a non-profit certificate program are likely to be community-oriented). This student was an online student who does not live in the Corpus Christi area, and, in contrast to other participants, his sense of community seemed more abstract: he consistently used "the community," the idea of doing a general good, as opposed to Hispanic students, who consistently used the phrase "*my* community" (emphasis ours).

Result Two: Employment Skills and Program Draws

Respondents described being drawn to the program out of a desire to better prepare for jobs or advance in their current employment and all of them mentioned the opportunity to practice and get better at writing as a major attraction. None of the respondents were English majors; most were seeking degrees in the social or natural sciences. The program was initially envisioned to serve professionals who work in non-profit agencies or students who have a strong desire to do so. One non-profit professional participant noted the program helped her "understand a little bit more about my non-profit work." All seven participants indicated that they found the program useful to their current jobs or future career plans.

Susan L. Popham (2016) shows how students from underserved backgrounds have a strong desire for skills-oriented coursework, and Natalia Matveeva (2015) describes identifying and teaching skills towards employability as a strategy "that can positively impact educational experiences of Hispanic students." (p. 6). Our participants reflected this finding; all seven quickly and readily described skills they had developed as a result of the program. When asked to reflect on particular skills, five participants described genres they had learned to adopt—frequently the standard list of proposals, letters, emails, and communications plans. Five participants explicitly linked the program to grant writing and one actually called it a "Grant Writing Certificate," even though grant writing is only one course in the program's sequence. Five of the seven participants highlighted technical and document design skills, such as working with text and color, designing for readability, placing visuals, and increasing their facility with software. Three participants highlighted writing and editing skills, or learning directness and concision, while two participants mentioned "writing for the web" in a general sense. Finally, when asked about skills, five participants talked about a variety of lessons learned that we coded as 'rhetorical sophistication,' including:

- The importance of thank-you messages
- When to bring in collaborators
- Balancing storytelling with data
- Heuristics for writing, or processes and questions to ask in the grant-writing process
- Knowledge of resources for grant writing
- Speeding up turnaround time on writing projects
- Audience awareness
- The importance of creativity
- Distinguishing between organizational needs, stakeholder needs, and served populations needs

Again, skills related to grant writing featured prominently in students' descriptions. One student described her most lesson learned as:

"I definitely learned how to not feel bad about asking for money." She, like many other participants, not only identified this skill as one that would be important to her work, but also expressed pride at being able to develop it.

Result Three: How Students Experience the Program

Because our program is delivered entirely online, we wanted to understand how participants engaged with faculty and connected to other students. The program's catalog description and assessment both highlight working in conjunction with non-profit staff and leadership as an essential outcome. Both in a pedagogical sense of community-building and with eyes towards the "relationships and genuine collaborations" that we see as typical of technical communication work at its best (Jones, 2016, p. 356). Participants universally described liking working with program faculty and each instructor in the program was mentioned by name positively at least once across all interviews. But fundamentally students' connections in the program are to individual courses and faculty rather than other students. While we see our courses as designed around collaboration, our students see group work. When asked about how connected they felt to other students in their courses, only three female participants described sustained connections and male participants talked negatively about their experiences with group work. Only one participant mentioned learning to collaborate as an important skill or takeaway in the program. All students rejected the idea that gender, cultural, or socioeconomic differences played a role in their course or program experiences. Four students specifically noted that they "didn't see" or "never saw" those things influencing their courses. This and each of the other results indicate takeaways that we must address in the certificate program.

Takeaways and Paths Forward

One final question remains: What do we do with what we've learned? If we want to improve our program and if we want to meaningfully help our students understand the systemic issues that cause the social problems that non-profits exist to address, how do we go forward? And what, if any, lessons are there for other TPC programs at HSIs that emphasize community engagement? We offer three takeaways that interweave and build on our results.

Takeaway One: A Strong Community and Social Justice Identity will Strengthen the Writing for Non-Profits Curriculum and Address Larger Disciplinary Needs

Initially, the program's identity was job preparation, an attempt to explicitly link writing skills to specific career paths. As an HSI, we were aware that job preparation was a major consideration for the students who attend our university, and the WNPR program appeared to be an opportunity to serve our students and offer a benefit to the community. Our second result concerning program draws confirms this perspective. When focusing on job preparation, we focused on equipping students to function in the linguistic and cultural spaces of non-profit writing. However, we did not build into the curriculum any examination of the ideologies that govern these linguistic and cultural spaces, nor did we include any methodologies to conduct such an examination. As our first result indicates, the program fails to ask students to investigate and draw on community- and culture-based motivations—this is something they bring to the table themselves.

We have been practicing poor non-profit management. A central tenet of effective non-profit management is that good non-profit managers are proactive rather than reactive (in non-profit fundraising circles, something we spend a fair amount of time on in our program, the terms are "proactive" and "responsive"). Proactive managers initiate "change from within and plan ahead to avoid or manage future problems" (Sakellariou, 2016, para. 7). In contrast, reactive managers react to events as they occur, which often results in a constant state of "firefighting mode," which is "stressful, inefficient, and expensive" because "it costs more to solve problems than prevent them" (para. 5). As a program that works closely with non-profit agencies and as one that discusses strategic planning and program design in some of our courses, this irony does not escape us.

As our program has developed, attention to social justice has been reactive. By conflating community involvement, social justice, and antiracism (as discussed above), we have created a situation in which we expect social justice and antiracist work will happen rather than explicitly planning for it or redesigning our program to ensure that it happens. Going forward, one of the major takeaways we get from listening to our students is that we need to work proactively to ensure such work is an explicit part of our program from now on.

The two senior-level (4000-level) courses in our curriculum would appear to be logical places to begin this proactive work. These two courses (Writing in the Non-profit Agency and Grants and Proposals) deal most specifically with TPC work within non-profit agencies, and students are already studying and, in some cases, working with non-profit agencies. Alongside their work we plan to include readings and discussions which offer additional critical perspectives on non-profits and how these agencies have developed in the United States, specifically including selections from *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence. For example, Paul Kivel's "Social Service or Social Change" provides a useful heuristic of self-analysis and reflection questions for people working in and for non-profits, while Ruth Wilson Gilmore's "In the Shadow of the Shadow State" offers readers a critical history of the non-profit industrial complex. Another point of discussion could be an exploration of how, no matter the motivations behind it, charities and "benevolent giving" perpetuate imbalances of power, creating a "benevolent empire" where those being dominated are ruled "for their own good" (Gilbert & Tiffin, 2008, p. 6). Non-profit agencies and private foundations which distribute grants owe their very existence to U.S. tax codes. Another relevant topic for social justice inquiry could be a discussion of how U.S. income tax codes, particularly the joint tax return, were created in a way that specifically puts African Americans at a substantial economic disadvantage (Brown, 2021). The above are examples of the kinds of resources program faculty are exploring in order to frame social justice conversations as part of our path forward. Many resources exist, and once we develop a common framework, individual faculty will identify resources appropriate for themselves and their pedagogical approaches.

As we identify the social problems the non-profit organizations we work with address and the ways those problems affect our community, we must build in discussions of the social structures that create and perpetuate those problems. We must invite our students to see themselves as part of those systems. And, most importantly, we must help our students to look beyond those ideologies, to ask questions such as "Does it have to be this way?" and "What can be done to change this system?" and "How can things be made more just?" Doing so also encourages us to be reflexive about whether our program codifies or resists narratives about higher education and TPC, and to what extent our program codifies meritocratic and color-evasive narratives about writing professionals.

Takeaway Two: Service Learning in the Curriculum Does Not Necessarily Equate to a Social Justice Curriculum

Although students reported they were gaining valuable skills and experience and felt that the service learning projects they were engaging in were meaningful, this does not translate to doing the work of social justice. Meaningful work in the community has its own value, but the work alone does not invite students to explore their own agency; it does not equip them to challenge social, cultural, or economic inequalities, nor does it seek to examine the systems of power and privilege that create those inequalities and keeps them in place. Our students appreciate the value of enhancing their skillsets or rhetorical and genre knowledge; however, skills were the only things they reported learning about.

While a focus on improved writing and communication through service learning is a program strength, students' lack of descriptions of learning experiences related to justice, ethics, collaboration/coalition-building, or social problems points to a missed opportunity. For example, as part of the Grants and Proposals course, WNPR students regularly work with the local food bank, youth services agencies, homeless shelters, health service organizations, and literacy councils. As a result of the work these agencies do and as they write their individual grant projects, students are introduced to studies about the effects of poverty, limited access to education, transportation injustice, and juvenile delinquency. As the program is currently configured, students study these social issues and work with agencies seeking to address them, but the courses are not configured to explore why these problems exist in much detail. Essentially, we left out a step. Creating assignments where students research and write about why social inequities exist beyond the immediate problem-solving context of a particular non-profit organization can provide a framework for conversations about social justice to occur, conversations that can be continued throughout the curriculum in a logical way, because each new agency provides a chance for student inquiry about different kinds of injustice and which populations are most affected by them.

Additionally, as our third result indicates, our students struggle to learn about collaboration and the significant role of coalition-building in justice work. As a first step, the two faculty who teach the Grant Writing course (one of whom is not part of this study) are developing in-class procedures, including work teams with specific roles, that more closely reflect the kinds of collaborative work that occurs in non-profit agencies. Additionally, students in different sections of the course (currently there are three sections) who are working with the same agency are being encouraged to communicate with one another and share information and ideas; we have developed a database to facilitate such collaborations. These are preliminary steps, and program faculty will continue to explore ways to more effectively foster meaningful student collaborations.

Takeaway Three: We Must Continually Listen to our Students to Identify the Gaps as Well as the Successes in our Program

This final takeaway is the easiest to state and the hardest to implement. As reflective teachers, we build opportunities into our courses for students to reflect on their own work and to give us feedback in a variety of meaningful ways beyond end-of-term, one-size-fits-all course evaluations. However, this exercise—looking at the program as a whole, examining how students move through it, and getting input about how course content impacts their experiences in the program and fits into their lives—was both affirming and humbling. Students affirmed some things we hoped were true about the program: that they felt they were developing job skills that they found relevant and useful and that they found the service learning projects they were engaging in to be meaningful. When we asked students what courses, experiences, or skills they would like to see in the program, some of their answers—such as requesting more networking opportunities with local agencies or doing more video and visual projects to help students build their portfolios—are things we are adding to our courses right now. In this way, students participate in the program as co-designers, rather than just as customer-feedback survey fillers. These conversations inform choices about course and program-level strategies, pedagogical changes, and more.

We were also humbled to learn that students found what we believed to be important aspects of the program, including working on collaborative projects, to be less valuable and equated it with school drudgery. More humbling was the realization that doing situated work in the community did not lead the students to think about social justice in systematic, useful ways. Garcia (2019) recommended that organizations that not only proclaim but actively promote an HSI identity must "value and embrace nondominant input, process, and outcome variables" (p. 118). One way for us to enact this identity in our program is to formalize regular student input beyond an exit interview as program assessment, either through interviews or a student advisory council (we are currently exploring the feasibility of each avenue for our online program). By framing conversations with current and recently graduated students as a feedback and change mechanism for them as members of the community, we offer a way for students with Hispanic and other multiply marginalized identities to participate in continued iterative development of our program. By specifically inviting students to connect their experience in the program to their identities rather than just their demographics, we are able to consider our students' varied perspectives and see them as characters/agents in their own stories of causes, people, spaces, and communities rather than just male or female, white or Hispanic, 22 or 37 or 63 years old. By inviting them to tell us how the program benefits them and how they would improve it, we invite them to participate in localizing it to our actual students rather than what we imagine our students to be from limited in-class (or in-LMS) interactions.

Conclusion

The old proverb "be careful what you wish for" applies to us as we draw conclusions on this study. We wanted to discover what our students think of the WNPR program, to learn how they experience it, to ascertain whether students feel the program has value, and to learn what's working and what needs improvement. We received answers to these programmatic questions about our program, yes. We also—despite the study's small size and scope—learned a great deal that is relevant to current discussions about social justice, especially as it applies to HSIs trying to innovate in this curricular space to meet the needs of their students and communities. Long-term faculty members in our program had assumed that having students engage in meaningful service-learning projects in their own communities provided an openly social justice component to our curriculum. Our own students showed us these were gaps in our program; conversations with them helped us identify and address those gaps.

Among the usual suspects in limitations of studies of this scale, we recognize that the initial research was designed to look for some different things than we ended up finding. When writing our initial proposal and IRB our primary interest was the modality of the online program and how students experienced it and each other. We designed our protocols to learn about how their social and cultural backgrounds affected their experiences, but did not explicitly set out to study the social justice orientation of the program; this was a theme that emerged during analysis rather than something we set out to find. At the same time, that these themes emerged regardless of our study design suggests to us something about their importance. As we seek ways to continually and intentionally gather the kind of data this study generated—to listen to our students—we must also be prepared to continually act on what we learn. Follow-up research from this project will investigate the uptake of social justice curricula among TPC students: how do they perceive, experience, and understand social justice pedagogies as part of their larger experiences and studies?

What characterizes effective ways to frame and inspire this work in our program, in our university, and in our region? We must be flexible and adaptive—something we know from the discipline of technical communication, but something which can be difficult to implement in higher education.

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Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Script for 60-minute semi-structured interviews.

During this interview, an investigator will ask several questions in order to:

1. establish context for participants' experiences in the Writing for Non-Profits (WNPR) Certificate program,
2. gather details of participants' experiences in the WNPR Certificate program that relate in particular to sociocultural issues,
3. gather details of participants' experiences related to the online nature of the WNPR Certificate program.

At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer must provide the consent form and receive the participant's signature before continuing and before starting the recorder. The interviewer will point out sections on the consent form regarding the purpose and potential risks of participating, and will remind the participant that they can stop the interview at any time.

Section A: The following questions have to do with your general context and reasons for joining the WNPR program.

1. How would you self-identify in terms of ethnicity, gender, and/or socioeconomic status?
2. Are you originally from Corpus Christi or the Coastal Bend, or did you come here from somewhere else?
3. Along with the Writing for Non-Profits Certificate, what degree and major field of study were you seeking? (Major, minor, etc)
4. What drew you to the Writing for Non-Profits Certificate?

Section B: The following questions ask you to reflect on sociocultural aspects of the WNPR program

5. Could you tell me about a normal week for you while taking one of the online courses in the WNPR program? When or where did you normally do coursework? What sorts of things enabled your success? What impediments did you experience?
6. How connected did you feel to other students and faculty in the program? What encouraged or discouraged those connections for you?
7. To what extent—if any—were you able to draw on your cultural, personal, regional, or other identities and integrate them into your work in the program?

8. Have you ever felt as if your gender affected your experience in the program? These could be positive, negative, or other kinds of effects.
9. Have you ever felt as if your cultural or racial identity affected your experience in the program? These could be positive, negative, or other kinds of effects.
10. Have you ever felt as if your socioeconomic background affected your experience in the program? These could be positive, negative, or other kinds of effects

Section C: The following questions ask you to reflect on the WNPR program more generally

11. What did you feel were particular advantages or challenges of the online nature of the program?
12. Describe a learning experience you found most valuable in the program. Least valuable?
13. Did you develop skills that you felt would benefit you in your professional or personal life? What skills did you develop? What were skills you wish you had developed in the program?
14. How do you think the program could be improved to make it more useful?
15. Overall, what benefit did you derive from the courses you took in the WNPR certificate program?

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