

CHAPTER 8.

NEGOTIATING DOMINANCE
IN WRITING PROGRAM
ADMINISTRATION: A CASE STUDY

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Kumeyaay Land Acknowledgment: *The University of California, San Diego campus where the Dimensions of Culture Program lives sits on unceded Kumeyaay territory. The Kumeyaay have been in San Diego for over 10,000 years and today, Kumeyaay tribal members are living within twelve distinct sovereign bands across the United States (Viejas Enterprises, 2015). Every program that the university houses is embroiled in a paradox of claiming a public service mission while enacting that mission on unceded land. Higher education institutions across the United States live on unceded indigenous lands. This shared reality represents one way in which first-year writing programs intersect across the United States.*

Administering first-year composition (FYC) is a project of advocacy. In FYC, we guide first-year students in transitioning to college and developing their communicative agency. We support graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) as they navigate the institution and prepare for careers in higher education. We employ adjuncts and contingent faculty seeking more secure employment in a highly unstable job market. Yet, FYC administrators are complicit in maintaining the status quo of promoting a college degree as a ticket to opportunity, freedom, and success. As fellow contributor Iris Ruiz (2016) asserted in her monograph, *Reclaiming Composition for Chicanos/as and Other Ethnic Minorities: A Critical History and Pedagogy*, the implicit goal of FYC is not to challenge power hierarchies, but “to create and maintain a hegemonic middle class [by] encourag[ing] students to think and write in ways that will make them good citizens of the academic (and larger) community and viable candidates for good jobs” (p. 43). Indeed, as the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) (2021) describes in the *CCCC Statement on White Language Supremacy*, the emphasis on Standard Academic English in FYC and educational institutions more broadly

coerces student-writers to assimilate into “a worldview that is simultaneously pro-white, cisgender, male, heteronormative, patriarchal, ableist, racist, and capitalist” (para. 4). How can we come to terms with the fact that our field exists to bolster a White supremacist, cisheteronormative, patriarchal, ableist, meritocratic elite? How do we reckon with administering FYC programs, if it means that we’re reinforcing the very systems of dominance that create the conditions of struggle facing our students, faculty, and staff—including ourselves?

This chapter attempts to answer these questions through a case study of an FYC program whose explicit aim is teaching writing as a tool for speaking truth to power: the Dimensions of Culture Program (DOC) at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). This case study reveals that DOC, like any FYC program, capitulates to, while also resisting, power imbalances shaping our field and institutions. Only from reckoning with *how* our programs both reinforce and transform systems of dominance, I contend, can we fulfill the democratizing potential of higher education. Indeed, when we identify the systems that make our programs function, the conditions in which complicity occurs, and where we can impact change, we create conditions for agency within and against the converging systems of institutional bureaucracies, academic elitism, the capitalist structure of higher education in the United States, and White supremacy.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter uses the methodology of a case study to analyze DOC’s struggle to hold onto its legacy as a counterhegemonic FYC program at an elite university. Intersectionality grounds my analysis. First articulated by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality is a framework for making simultaneously visible *both* efforts to undermine *and* capitulations to power hierarchies within single-axis social systems that eschew contradiction and treat differences as mutually exclusive categories. As Vivian M. May (2015) put it, intersectionality “underscores how we can participate in forms of dominance, harm, and subordination even as we also fight hegemonic relations and pursue justice” (p. 5). This case study centers intersectionality to examine how DOC, in our struggle to advocate for students, faculty, and staff, *both* exercises agency within *and* experiences subordination to the hegemonic systems of UCSD, FYC, and higher education.

To situate DOC in its particular historical and institutional context as an FYC program that resulted from minoritized student demands for culturally-relevant education at UCSD, I also draw on cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). Emerging from activity theory (Engeström, 1996; Engeström et al., 1999), a framework for understanding human activity as complex, socially-situated

phenomena, CHAT (Prior et. al, 2007) is a tool for understanding how the work of writing program administration (WPA), like the activity of writing itself, “is situated in concrete interactions that are simultaneously improvised locally and mediated by historically-provided tools and practices” (p. 17). CHAT reminds us that FYC programs are not the sum-total of their activities, but rather, parts of larger systems with particular histories, cultures, values, and interests.

CHAT, approached intersectionality, allows me to conduct an *intersectional cultural-historical activity-based case study* of DOC as an FYC program *in process*—as it *both* teaches writing through the theory and practice of social revolution *and* belongs to a large research university focused on capitalistic growth and research prestige. Taken together, CHAT and intersectionality help me ask several interconnected questions: what are the systems, both local and global, in which DOC participates? How do those systems intersect? How does DOC’s positionality within those intersecting systems both facilitate and detract from the counterhegemonic change the program promotes? I draw on institutional research about UCSD as well as my own knowledge and experience as the Associate Director of DOC. To address these questions, I use the seven elements of CHAT used to analyze texts and contexts (Prior et al., 2007) to examine the following, in no particular order:

- How DOC came to be (production);
- How people feel and think about DOC (representation);
- How DOC circulates its work on/beyond campus (distribution);
- How the campus community takes up DOC (reception);
- How people interact in DOC (socialization);
- What activities happen in DOC (activity);
- The historical, institutional, cultural contexts in which DOC operates (ecology).

This case study by no means attempts to be comprehensive in its analysis of these elements in DOC, but rather, to highlight some areas where tensions, contradictions, and the need for ongoing power negotiations lie. It is my hope that writing program administrators can apply pieces of this case study and my analysis to their home institutions to facilitate and foster meaningful systemic change within their programs.

AN INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

UCSD, where DOC lives, is widely known as a preeminent research institution, within the University of California (UC) system and the global ecology of

higher education. Opening its doors in 1960 to advance climate change research and the growing field of engineering, the university has become particularly prestigious in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) (Regents, 2023). The Scripps Institute of Oceanography is among the largest marine biology laboratories in the world. UC San Diego Health, the academic health system, is a national leader in pulmonology, neurology, and cardiology, among other medical specialties (Brubaker, 2020). It is worth noting the number of students graduating with STEM degrees from UCSD is three times the national average (Clark, 2016). At STEM-oriented UCSD, writing programs are relatively underfunded and obscured. We must fight for institutional resources and recognition, which contributes to the culture of faculty competition that runs rampant in higher education.

The material wealth surrounding UCSD exacerbates competition. UCSD is located in La Jolla, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in San Diego County. The campus is expanding with new student housing, a living and learning neighborhood, research centers, a light-rail transit line (Regents, 2022b), and even a Target in the student center. And the undergraduate student body is rapidly increasing. In Fall 2016, the university enrolled 8,630 new students (Regents, 2017). By Fall 2021, that number jumped to 11,148, the number of new students increasing by several hundred each year in between (Regents, 2022c). Additionally, the international student population at UCSD has become among the highest in the US, and while fewer international students have enrolled since the onset of the pandemic, in Fall 2019, they constituted 25 percent of the student body (Robbins, 2020). As the campus infrastructure and student population grow, resources for the writing programs do not. The current distribution of university resources disproportionately impacts multilingual international student-writers as well as faculty and staff supporting larger numbers of incoming students in their transition to the university. Coupled with the extant marginalization of writing amidst the STEM culture of UCSD, institutional growth exacerbates a sense of powerlessness in the writing programs, fueling imposter syndrome, demoralization, and burnout, and fortifying institutional hierarchy.

FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION AT UCSD

To understand how the writing programs operate within the institutional ecology of UCSD, one has to understand the unique position of FYC at the university. Undergraduate education at UCSD functions on the college system, adapted from Oxford and Cambridge universities, in an effort to create a small liberal arts experience for students within a large research institution. Each of the university's seven (soon to be eight) undergraduate colleges houses its own FYC

program, which teaches composition in alignment with the college's intellectual theme. In addition to these seven (soon to be eight) writing programs, the university is also home to the Analytical Writing Program (AWP). Independent from the colleges, AWP offers writing courses to students across colleges who have not yet satisfied the UC's Entry Level Writing Requirement, which they must successfully complete before enrolling in their college's writing program (Regents, 2022a).

While the college system generates diverse, innovative approaches to writing at UCSD, it also creates a culture of isolation for the writing programs. Each FYC program varies radically—from its curriculum and the structure of writing instruction to its degree of collaboration with the other writing programs. Some programs offer composition as small studio classes taught by graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), faculty, and adjuncts, while other programs offer composition as large lectures taught by faculty, with breakout discussion sections facilitated by GTAs and adjuncts. GTAs, adjuncts, and faculty teaching in the writing programs come from myriad departments and disciplines, such as literature, sociology, ethnic studies, visual arts, history, Latin American studies, and education studies. Their breadth of disciplinary backgrounds enriches students' learning experiences, but it also means that many instructors come into the writing programs with little to no background in composition pedagogy; and, unless their program has a compositionist on the administration, instructors may get little explicit mentorship and instruction in the teaching of writing. Some of the writing programs provide comprehensive training in writing pedagogy, while others prioritize training in the teaching of content specific to their college's mission. What's more, some programs collaborate extensively with one another, deliberating on pedagogical approaches and curriculum, while others prefer to operate independently. UCSD is just now, for the first time, convening a Council of Writing Directors following a review of writing instruction at the university. While the formation of the council is promising for advocating for writing on campus, the college-based structure of FYC can make it difficult to generate the collective power we need to be frontliners of first-year students' experiences.

This culture of isolation exacerbates, and is exacerbated by, the devaluation of WPA work in higher education. As the editors wrote in the introduction, WPA work “plugs directly into campus-wide conversations in ways not easily felt or understood by all faculty or administrators.” Moreover, across many colleges and universities, writing is perceived as *a skill* that can be performed with minimal training and research (Kahn, 2017), not as *a legitimate field of scholarly inquiry*. As the thinking goes, students learn how to write, and teachers learn how to teach writing, through osmosis. At UCSD, this assumption obscures the

contributions the writing programs make to the university's prestige and undermines our values as an institution.

In FYC, and possibly only here, students engage explicitly with questions of what it means to be a knowledge-maker. Current research showed FYC is among the strongest predictors of student success and student retention, and that when students succeed in their FYC courses, that success shapes their overall satisfaction with their education and contributes directly to high graduation rates (Garrett et al., 2017). Given UCSD's recent progression to the third best public college in the nation, according to the *Forbes America's Top Colleges List* and based on factors such as maintaining high retention and graduation rates (Rubalcava, 2022), this finding suggests that the writing programs at UCSD contribute significantly to the institution's success. Yet, to date, the writing programs are not acknowledged in the university's coverage of its rankings, despite the chancellor's acknowledgment of the importance of writing to overall student experience (University of California San Diego, 2014). The devaluation of writing at UCSD not only undermines the goals of the institution, but it also maintains writing studies' marginalized status in higher education. Ultimately, this coerces writing programs at UCSD and elsewhere into fighting to justify our existence.

Like many FYC programs, the writing programs at UCSD are staffed primarily by contingent faculty and staff. In this way, DOC is part of a systemic ecology of unprotected, low-wage WPA work. While program directors at UCSD are tenured teaching faculty, those of us who are associate or assistant directors hold hybrid contracts as both non-tenured faculty (union represented) and staff. The hybridity of our positions can compound the isolation and devaluation of writing at UCSD. We are often the primary administrators in our programs with expertise in composition studies, yet we do not sit on the Academic Senate and cannot participate in faculty voting around or on faculty committees that make decisions about such matters as curriculum, campus planning, campus budget, and more. At the same time, as associate/assistant directors, we are often responsible for high-impact administrative functions. We provide pedagogical leadership, supervising, training, and mentoring to GTAs as well as, in some programs, to guest tenured faculty from different disciplines who teach FYC courses in the college writing programs. We develop curriculum, designing program-wide learning outcomes and building assessment structures for FYC courses. We adjudicate high-impact procedures, such as academic integrity cases and harassment and discrimination cases. The responsibilities we hold do not match the precarity of our positions, another intersection linking DOC and other writing programs across the nation (WPA Executive Committee, 2019). Scarce resources and minimal job security shortchanges GTA training, faculty development, and, ultimately, student learning. This ecology often leads to high

turnover in the college writing programs and perpetuates the devaluation of writing studies in higher education.

In some ways, the college-based structure of FYC at UCSD is a source of strength. It allows students to experience the capaciousness of writing, and faculty and instructors to fuse writing instruction with their disciplinary expertise. Yet for these potentials to be fully realized and to offset the existing constraints around community-building and knowledge-sharing at UCSD, university administration must invest in writing. In the absence of that investment, FYC programs at UCSD capitulate to a capitalist, meritocratic culture of competition in our fight for much-needed resources. This fight detracts our attention away from pedagogical innovation and maintains the grind culture of academia.

THE DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE PROGRAM

The very creation of DOC stems from radical student resistance to an ecology of exclusion at UCSD and in higher education more broadly. Housed in Thurgood Marshall College, named after the first Black justice on the U.S. Supreme Court, DOC teaches composition through the theory and practice of social revolution. In the 1960s, as the student movement for civil rights gathered momentum across the United States, the Black Student Council (BSC) and the Mexican American Youth Association (MAYA) at UCSD came together to demand an undergraduate college dedicated to the histories, cultures, and lived experiences of working-class Black, Brown, and White students (Ferguson, 2015). Originally named Third College when it formed in 1970, this college eventually became Thurgood Marshall College, and DOC, originally Third College Writing, was established as the academic program for incoming Marshall students new to the university (Regents, 2022c). DOC's roots in anticapitalistic, antiracist student activism make FYC somewhat of an anomaly at UCSD.

Given this history, from the vantage point of DOC, UCSD's prestige has been shaped as much by student activism as by cutting-edge research. For example, within DOC, the Chicano Legacy Mural is one of the university's most significant achievements. This 17 x 54-foot mosaic portraying the Chicano Movement takes up one full side of a lecture hall on campus and results from the vision of UCSD's Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), a student-run organization supporting Chicano and Latinx students, and persistent collaboration from faculty and staff, including Jorge Mariscal, the former director of DOC (Clark, 2011). Along with subsequent public art installations on campus, including the Black Legacy Mural in the university's student center in 2015, the Chicano Legacy Mural provides a permanent reminder of both minoritized students' demands for institutional representation and the university's

promise to invest in them. We teach this history in DOC. We assign the original student demands authored by BSC-MAYA that formed the college, the Lumumba/Zapata Demands (Black Student Council and the Mexican American Youth Association, 1969), at the beginning of the DOC sequence, and we teach the Chicano Legacy Mural as part of a unit on UCSD student activism as students produce their own arguments for campus change in the capstone course of the DOC sequence.

At the same time as DOC upholds a legacy of student demands for counterhegemonic education, as an FYC program, DOC is also bound up in the university's requirement that students become proficient academic writers. DOC makes transparent this both/and positionality through curriculum, which "outline[s] the contradictions of U.S. history and culture and ask[s] students to consider the extent to which the nation's founding principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness have been realized for all" (Mariscal, 2013), while it also helps students "develop the critical reading, drafting and revision, and metacognitive processes necessary to succeed at UCSD and beyond" (Dimensions of Culture Program, 2022). Like all FYC programs at UCSD, but *unlike* FYC programs at other institutions, DOC teaches writing through specific content so that we can simultaneously uphold the legacy of our college home and orient students its intellectual theme and prepare them for success as writers in and beyond the academy.

In DOC, we mediate our contradictory position at the university by emphasizing academic writing not as something to master, but as something to facilitate student agency—a tool used to speak truth to power with material impact. We manifest this principle through the sequencing of curriculum and the learning outcomes that ground them. In the introductory course of the year-long sequence, students *practice* critical reading through coming to terms with U.S. history from the perspectives of disenfranchised groups. In the argumentation course that follows, students *practice* persuasive writing through a rhetorical analysis of arguments for justice in the Civil Rights Movement and contemporary struggles for justice. In the capstone course, students *practice* research by proposing student-led interventions into campus culture issues. We purposefully emphasize *practice* in the curriculum to acknowledge students as agents of their own learning and to challenge ideologies of *mastery* and *assimilation* that Standard Academic English espouses. The sequencing of the curriculum emphasizes grounding action in critical consciousness. In critically examining the conditions that have enabled injustice to thrive in the United States early on in the sequence, DOC students are better positioned to imagine different futures at the culmination of the sequence.

The challenge facing us daily is aligning our teaching practices with DOC's focus on naming and resisting oppressive power structures. A primary way we

confront this challenge is through antiracist writing pedagogy education for DOC GTAs. In DOC, the term antiracist writing pedagogy refers to a teaching philosophy and toolbox of practical methods for centering issues of race, racism, and racial justice in FYC, alongside constant pedagogical self-reflection. As antiracist educators, we work with each other and our students to uncover how Standard Academic English is a form of White language supremacy (Inoue, 2019a) and White rhetorical and communication supremacy (Young, 2021). Antiracist writing pedagogy education in DOC supports instructors and students in engaging at their own levels of experiences while taking ownership of their pedagogical and writerly development.

This education of unlearning has compelled DOC to replace traditional grading with contract grading across the lower-division DOC sequence, so that we can better support students' development of their own writing process and their agency as writers. Utilizing contract grading means that we assess student writing based on completion, revision, and documentation of learning rather than on the subjective quality of the writing. In DOC, we've developed our own brand of contract grading by blending elements of specifications grading (Nilson, 2015) and elements of labor-based contract grading (Inoue, 2019b). We draw from Linda Nilson's framework to establish clear, detailed criteria (specifications) for each assignment, grade student work on a pass/fail basis, and allow students to revise any assignment that does not pass. So that the final course grades students earn more accurately reflect their learning, all assignments map onto explicit learning outcomes we have designed for the DOC sequence:

1. Defining, describing, and explaining promises and paradoxes in U.S. history, society, and culture.
2. Examining, giving examples of, and imagining interventions into the contradiction between the American promise of equality and reality of structural inequities.
3. Relating, synthesizing, and integrating the social and historical contexts of struggles for justice in the US, from the precolonial period through to the present day.
4. Reflecting on, communicating about, and asking questions about positionality in relation to U.S. history, society, and culture.
5. Recognizing, sharing, and committing to new interests, attitudes, and/or values about social justice.
6. Identifying and assessing learning style, learning needs, and learning resources in relation to critical reading, writing, and thinking.

At the core of our approach to grading is radical compassion: an endeavor to build trust and community between instructors and students by reimagining

the FYC classroom as a space for shifting entrenched power structures that force students “to adopt a normative White voice that devalues the specific practices of language and lived experiences of minoritized communities” (Johnston et al., 2022, p. 17). We use contract grading to subvert the notion that the teacher is the sole arbiter of good writing and, instead, we center the diverse literacies and knowledges that our students bring into the classroom.

Given our curriculum, DOC has developed a reputation as the social justice writing program among UCSD’s FYC programs. Some students even refer to DOC as the “Social Justice Warriors” writing program that “inDOC-trinates” students into a liberal agenda. What’s more, DOC exists on a UC campus nicknamed University of California for the Socially Dead (UCSD), located as it is in wealthy La Jolla and lacking a college town feel. DOC’s reputation as a social justice program on a “socially dead” campus, as it intersects with the current moment of politicized polarization and an invigorated Alt-right, poses compounded risks to fulfilling the revolutionary aims of the students and faculty who founded DOC’s Marshall College home. We don’t want to water-down curriculum, at the same time as we must prioritize the safety of students, TAs, staff, and faculty, and attempt to engage students and help them succeed as writers regardless of their political orientations. With few program faculty and staff with job security and structurally supported academic freedom, risk-taking is risky.

Despite our best intentions to be revolutionary educators, DOC capitulates to dominance in myriad ways. Analyzing DOC’s position within its UCSD home and in the field more broadly allows us to name these capitulations. Indeed, they are all systemic, based on existing networks and supersystems, and cannot be resolved through individual actors. Rather, they require vigilance so that we can attend to their harmful impacts.

- In helping students satisfy the University of California Writing Requirement, which stipulates that they “develop the command of argumentative strategies and the control of voice that will enable them to present their ideas cogently and persuasively” (UC Student Affairs, 2017), we reproduce colonialist ways of knowing, which reinforce individualism, rationality, self-control, and persuasion (Inoue, 2015, p. 48-49).
- In requiring students to follow academic citation conventions (APA, MLA), we valorize the individual over the collective. These citation styles shore up a Western understanding of source use, giving credit to individual authors and obscuring how knowledge emerges through varying degrees of collaborative authorship.

- While we utilize contract grading, in assigning letter grades at the end of the course, we condone a grading scale set by the university and subscribe to meritocracy.
- In assigning a rigorous workload of reading and writing assignments and expecting students to attend tri-weekly lectures in a lecture hall with limited accessibility, we privilege able-bodied, affluent students with few to no barriers in caring for their mental and physical health.
- In employing the least expensive laborers (GTAs and adjuncts) to take on the affective and intellectual labor of grading and responding to student writing, we participate in capitalism. While we have found ways to offset the burden on GTAs and adjuncts through comprehensive pedagogical training and subsidizing their professional development, many must go into debt and take on additional employment to survive.

A CONCLUSION WITH A FEW PLACES TO START

An intersectional cultural-historical activity theory can make visible the misfit of the institutional structures that contain our daily practices as writing instructors and administrators. This case study has revealed both alignments and disconnects between DOC's stated intentions and the program's impact. We teach FYC through the theory and practice of social revolution. At the same time, students experience our curriculum as, at once, emancipatory and coercive; administrators and faculty take significant pedagogical risks in teaching DOC curriculum, while also participating in an academic culture of competition that fuels isolation and demoralization; we resent and also consent to the dominance of STEM as the gold standard of academic prestige by participating in a system that devalues writing.

In naming contradictions in DOC, I intend to call attention to the larger power dynamics that we all face in our daily work as FYC administrators. I hope this builds solidarity across FYC administrators. I hope this invites reflection on how our programs' positional differences uniquely shape our negotiations with dominance—and by extension, on how our work as writing program administrators *is* a project of negotiating dominance at the same time as it is one of advocacy. I hope this chapter sparks ideas for how we might make more intentional choices about how to engage power in our programs, at our institutions, and in our fields.

While each institution has its own unique sets of structural constraints and affordances, the channels our programs must go through to approve curriculum

and learning outcomes, which inevitably shape how we assess student writing, to approve or deny student access to credit-bearing writing courses, among other routine practices in WPA work, are overwhelmingly determined by units of leadership that seldom set foot in an FYC classroom. Perhaps the university will never change. Perhaps our negotiations with dominance will persist. Perhaps FYC will continue to be treated as a service, not a legitimate field. I propose that we resist the urge to settle these uncertainties once and for all and instead, move toward our contradictions to learn what they might teach us. Here are a few places to start:

- How can we leverage the particular histories of our programs and the broader successes of the institutions in which they live to secure more resources?
- How can writing pedagogy education in our programs influence future writing studies teacher-scholar-administrators to become more cognizant of the larger ecosystems in which FYC operates?
- How can we refuse to feel defeated by the systems in which we participate and instead, develop more intentional terms of that participation?

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