

“I Never Intended It To Become a Symbol of Resistance”:

An Interview with Xavier Maciel about the Sanctuary Campus Movement

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Since the 2016 U.S. election, faculty, staff, and students at more than 200 colleges and universities have petitioned for their campuses to be declared as sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants, a preemptive move that pits academic institutions against federal authorities. Like many in academia, I first became aware of the sanctuary campus movement in the weeks following the 2016 election, when a link to a petition arrived in my inbox. Around this time, I began to encounter news stories about the movement and its various manifestations (Cleek 2017; Machado 2017), as well as indications that the movement was provoking conversations about the relationship between higher education and the broader civic tapestry (Xia 2017), the history of sanctuary spaces (Allen 2016), and the contemporary legal complexities of creating such spaces (Olivas 2016). Inevitably, these were accompanied by reports of pushback by state and local authorities (Redden 2016; Schmidt 2017), including speculation that

the Trump administration would cut federal funding for institutions that embraced sanctuary policies (Cruz 2017). Having generated a substantial amount of press coverage and, indeed, a substantial amount of writing and rhetoric, the sanctuary campus movement stands out as one of the most ambitious responses to the growing sentiment in the United States that direct action must play a more prominent role in our political lives.

The ongoing, multipronged effort to declare campuses as sanctuaries is of singular importance for teachers and scholars of writing and rhetoric because it impacts the very spaces in which we research, teach, and learn. In particular, as a teacher-scholar interested in the intersection of space, rhetoric, and civic engagement, I am drawn to the spatial significance of the movement, to the significance of demanding more from the institutional geographies we inhabit. A resident of Southern California in the months after Trump took office, I was acutely aware of the impact of the newly harsh immigration policies being meted out by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). I was also aware that some were devising countervailing measures. Some, like Xavier Maciel, a student at Pomona College, were laying the groundwork for a movement that most of us only glimpsed in the fiery demands of petitions.

I first encountered Xavier's work in the form of a map, titled "Sanctuary Campuses," that was tracking the status of petitions across the country. This map was created by Aparna Parikh, a grad student at Penn State, using data Xavier was collecting in a publicly accessible spreadsheet, titled "Sanctuary Campus Petitions." The spreadsheet was (and still is) a massive repository documenting the sanctuary campus movement, providing links to the over 200 petitions and updates regarding their status. As I started perusing the repository, eager to have access to a bevy of texts, I found myself less interested in scrutinizing the fiery demands of the petitions and more interested in comprehending the infrastructure of the movement. Who was Xavier? Why did he build this repository? How did he maintain it?

In early 2018, I reached out to Xavier to see if he was willing to answer these and other questions. He agreed, and I followed up with

a series of emails inquiring about his activism. What follows is a consolidated and lightly edited version of our correspondence. At the end, in the spirit of opening up this conversation to others interested in public rhetoric and civic writing on college campuses, I offer some takeaways from my correspondence with Xavier. Amidst the growing body of literature on the sanctuary campus movement, some notable examples feature the voices of students, including an interview with a student activist in New York (Pastor 2017) and the firsthand account of a student activist in Oklahoma (Watson 2017). I hope this interview contributes to that specific strand of the literature and that it encourages the production and circulation of still more material about students directly involved in redefining the spaces of higher education.

Jens Lloyd (JL): Can you describe your involvement in the sanctuary campus movement?

Xavier Maciel (XM): Before I got involved, there wasn't a movement. It wasn't until I created the list of sanctuary campuses that it became a movement. I provided and created all the resources that started this movement. I also got it on a national stage. I created the Sanctuary Campus Petitions List, co-authored the Sanctuary Campus Petition Template, co-ran the Sanctuary Schools FB, co-created the Sanctuary Campus Map, and created the Sanctuary and Immigration Newsletter. So, everything that has centered around this movement I've had a hand in.

JL: I am particularly interested in your online activism, namely the repository of sanctuary campus petitions and the Sanctuary Schools Facebook page. What led you to start these projects?

XM: It all started at the college I attend, Pomona College in Claremont, California. When Donald Trump was elected, a group of teachers co-authored the first-ever sanctuary petition. I came across it and thought it was a great idea for my school. People began to share it and get signatures on social media, and

then Harvard and Stanford saw our petition and decided to do something similar. I saw all three floating around Facebook and thought it would be a good idea to have these petitions in one place for schools outside the elite world to copy. As I am the son of undocumented immigrants and the brother to a sister with DACA, this topic hit close to home. I wanted Rutgers, my sister's university, to copy it. I posted the initial list of petitions on some immigrant activist Facebook pages and convinced others to join. It took off like wildfire. In a week, fifty schools had jumped on board. The rest is history.

JL: Can you tell me more about what you hoped to achieve by creating this list of petitions?

XM: When I created the list, there were only three schools doing it: Pomona College, Harvard, and Stanford. These schools are elite schools. All of their acceptance rates fall under 10 percent. So, early on, this idea of petitioning was exclusively elite. I saw that as a problem. By sharing this list on a college immigration reform conference page, I essentially invited all schools to copy these petitions, no matter of how "elite" or "not-elite" they were. These three schools added legitimacy to the idea of this being a movement. I hoped state and other private schools would see these petitions and use them to create their own. I saw it as a form of education and a way to get signatures. I never intended it to become the spark for a national movement. I just wanted to let others know that these three schools were petitioning to become sanctuaries. I never intended it to become a symbol of resistance.

JL: How did you build and maintain it? Were there any significant challenges?

XM: When I had the idea to start this list, I initially approached two organizations and one nonprofit for support. They all wanted to focus their energy on fighting for sanctuary cities instead of sanctuary campuses. Because I didn't have initial support, I had to essentially do everything on my own. That was the initial challenge. I didn't have a team to lean on. Eventually, this list took off and it became a daily thing to maintain it. I would wake

up every day to emails from people sending me petitions or reporters wanting interviews. It was tons of work. I was forced to constantly upgrade the list since people wanted more filters. The initial list only had three columns. Now it has close to ten. Those extra columns were requests from people nationally that I decided to incorporate. It was tons of work, but someone had to do it.

JL: What experiences or skills did you bring to this project?

XM: I have a very interesting background. I'm a two-time college dropout that happened to have stumbled into Pomona College. The last school I dropped out of was an undergraduate business school. This was after getting an associate's degree in accounting from a community college. So, I knew business. Between dropping out and stumbling into Pomona, I took a year off from school. During that year, I worked for a nonprofit and for Senator Cory Booker. So, I had marketing, finance, and business skills I had learned firsthand and from my community college and self-study. One of the things that really helped outside of the business world was the understanding of previous social movements. When I started doing the work I did for this movement, I had just begun researching the 1968 Chicano student walkouts in Los Angeles. I was doing a research project on this movement and really dissected why it failed. Part of the reason was that the walkouts had occurred before the demands could be handed over to the school district. This understanding of historical mistakes pushed me to ensure that this movement had grounds to stand on through pushing petition demands.

JL: Your educational and professional background is really interesting. What did you learn about activism from your nonprofit and political work?

XM: I played all roles in the nonprofit, one of which was working with the marketing manager. I learned about how people think and work. It was invaluable to the movement. I also learned a lot working for Senator Cory Booker. When the issue is a moral imperative, you cannot stand down.

JL: Has your college coursework influenced your activism?

XM: I'm a history major. Most of the classes I take are history courses. I can't begin to explain how invaluable learning history is. Many people see it as a field that isn't valuable. I disagree. Before you do anything, one must recognize that you are not the first to do it. Learning history allows me to interrogate and deconstruct the actions of the past, to learn from them, and then to figure out how to adapt those lessons in our current time. History makes us humble. It makes us lifelong researchers and learners.

JL: Regarding your study of the Chicano student walkouts, was this a school project or something you did on your own?

XM: This was actually for a final essay in my Chicano history class, taught by Professor Summer-Sandoval, who is currently my advisor.

JL: In general, do you find that your knowledge of history is important to your activism?

XM: I think my knowledge and interest in history has been extremely important in all my ventures. After starting the sanctuary campus work, I decided I wanted to do work in public education. I started the Education March and ended up merging with the March for Public Education. We marched in thirteen cities and had thousands of people attend. This was during the summer of 2017. I'm now working with other social causes helping them expand their reach. History is my only tool.

JL: Were there any skills that your projects supporting the sanctuary campus movement helped you to develop?

XM: It was very important to me that this movement would reach as many people as possible. In order to do this, I needed to develop guerilla online marketing skills. After the first day of the list circulating on Facebook, 16 schools had joined. I used that information to pitch *Univision*, *The Washington Post*, and

other huge media outlets. So, I had to learn how to pitch things to journalists very fast and in a way that they would want to report on it. I succeeded, and those things can be found in a *Univision* news report (Univision 2016) and a *Washington Post* article (Svrlunga 2016). I also needed to learn how to be a good interviewee for reporters. It's a skill set all in itself. If you examine what newspapers have quoted me on, those sentences were formatted in a very specific way to get across the points I needed to.

JL: How did you go about learning "to be a good interviewee"? Were there any specific resources you used?

XM: I was lucky enough to have mentors during this process who had lots of experience with activism in media. Before interviews, I reached out to my mentors who were professors in ethnic studies all over the country. They helped me prep for my interviews and supported me through them. They helped me deconstruct my statements to their bare minimum in order to be most effective.

JL: Can you describe the response that these projects have received so far?

XM: The response has been incredible. This movement has caused the world to know that these students exist on our campuses. This movement has caused a lot of great things to happen at schools, such as: more resources for undocumented students, the hiring of undocumented student coordinators at colleges, programs and scholarships for undocumented students, and much, much more. It has also been attacked by politicians nationally. Some states have gone so far as banning sanctuary campuses from their states.

JL: Has working on these projects changed the way you think about campuses?

XM: It has. It's convinced me that the higher education system was not ever intended to serve marginalized students. We need to

change the way schools think of their students. The consequences of this movement have been that schools were forced to look at themselves in a mirror and forced to do something because it was made apparent that they were not effectively serving these marginalized students. That makes you question what else have they turned a blind eye to.

JL: This is fascinating to me because, before contacting you, I'd assumed that the sanctuary campus movement was mostly a response to political changes taking place beyond campuses. But now I see that, for you, it might be more of a response to internal problems within campuses. I would characterize your stance towards higher education as somewhat adversarial. Do you agree? If not, how would you characterize it?

XM: I have been a college student at four schools, in two states, on different coasts. I have been a student at an engineering school, a business school, a community college, and now an elite liberal arts college, all of which haven't been prepared to deal with the modern student. The sanctuary campus movement was a reactive movement to the failures at college campuses. The failure was that they weren't prepared for the modern complexities that students carry, such as undocumented status. The movement was reactive in order to address these internal failures. College historically is a system designed to keep certain groups of people from gaining social mobility. It still is today. It is not designed to support undocumented students, and that is a failure in our modern schools.

Before I corresponded with Xavier, the sanctuary campus movement aligned comfortably with my belief that campuses are rife with opportunities for students and others to get involved in the civic life that surrounds them. I also assumed that campuses are compatible with rhetorical education, especially when considering campus organizations, campus publications, and other cocurricular outlets for engagement. My correspondence with Xavier disrupted this belief, encouraging me to recognize that, as much as they encourage

the civic engagement and rhetorical self-awareness of inhabitants, campuses also generate obstacles for such engagement and self-awareness, obstacles like those articulated by Xavier towards the end of the interview. Campuses are ideologically and bureaucratically fraught geographies, and, counterintuitively, this makes them both ideal and inhospitable places for the efforts of students like Xavier.

In tandem with this newly complicated view of campuses, my correspondence with Xavier has prompted me to reconsider a line of inquiry surrounding the implementation of publicly oriented pedagogies and the extent to which these pedagogies (dis)regard the campus. What is the place of the campus in writing and rhetoric curricula that incorporate service learning? Some have worried that, in the rush to look beyond campus confines, we risk neglecting the terrain we share most immediately with colleagues, students, and others. In their thoughtful critique of service-learning initiatives, Donna M. Bickford and Nedra Reynolds (2002) opine that "sending students away from the university may simply reinforce the notion of the ivory tower for them or lead them to believe that, while the community may need their services, the university does not" (244). Similarly, Douglas Reichert Powell (2007) problematizes the unidirectional aim of curricula that emphasize community engagement. "Perhaps," he muses, "we need to question whether 'intervention' is something that must always and only occur beyond the university walls. To postulate that the only place in need of intervention is the town, and not the gown, might be another, trickier form of academic exceptionalism" (223). Neither Bickford and Reynolds nor Powell argue against publicly oriented pedagogies; rather, what they suggest is that, if we are to pursue such pedagogies in college-level writing and rhetoric courses, the campus community must be a primary site of engagement.

Xavier's work highlights the stakes of recognizing as much. Yes, the sanctuary campus movement pits institutions of higher education against the federal government. But, more incisively, within our institutions, it pits inclusivity against inertia by calling for a more responsive and, in turn, more resilient university where the sense of community is not casually assumed but consistently refashioned in the image of all who inhabit the terrain. In this way, Xavier's

determination to accumulate and amplify offers one model for how to go about intervening in the spaces of higher education. Rather than seizing the moment, he aims to sustain the momentum that he gleans from his surroundings and from his study of history. Though the sanctuary campus movement is timely, it follows a sustained wave of campus-centric immigrant rights activism in recent years. It was Obama, not Trump, who was deemed the “Deporter in Chief” (Gonzalez 2017). Furthermore, the sanctuary campus movement builds upon the legacy of the sanctuary movement of the 1980s. This earlier wave of activism, which centered on places of worship, was a religious and moral movement organized by faith leaders across the United States to care for people fleeing violence in Central America. It was also, importantly, a political movement that acknowledged the United States’ overt and covert military actions throughout Central America as the impetus for the plight of these refugees. Thus, members of the sanctuary movement in the United States were owning up to their country’s complicity in the violence that was motivating the migration at the time and, in fact, continues to motivate it today (Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991; Tinti 2018). The sanctuary campus movement, I believe, invites a similar type of inward-looking scrutiny leveled not only at the nation but at the campuses we inhabit and at the commonplace narratives we weave about how readily these sites promote and permit social change.

On the subject of narratives about social change and educational sites, let me close with another bit of history that I have collected as a result of corresponding with Xavier. An important figure in the Chicano student walkouts of 1968 was Sal Castro, a teacher who was an ardent supporter of the students. In the aftermath of the walkouts, he was blackballed by the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and bounced around to various schools within the district. But, eventually, he got a stable position and, in 2009, LAUSD named a middle school after him (Sahagun 2018). Castro’s ultimate triumph conforms to a hopeful narrative about progress. Yet, there is lingering bitterness about how Castro was treated after the walkouts that should not be overlooked because LAUSD decided so drastically and so belatedly to reverse course. This parallels how institutions of higher education have taken rich and complex histories of student activism from that era and folded them into institutionally sanctioned strategic communications (Springer 2008) or even used them as

inspiration for naming campus cafes (Rodríguez 2000). In the case of the Chicano student walkouts, especially now that Castro's name is affixed to LAUSD property, there is all the more reason to avoid a neat, linear narrative about progress in favor of a narrative that foregrounds the bitterly contested nature of educational sites.

Similarly, affixing the label of "sanctuary" to a campus carries tremendous meaning in itself, but what is just as meaningful is the challenge that such a label poses to the narratives we tell ourselves and others about the terrain we inhabit. Why, now, do we need to call a campus a sanctuary? Why, now, do we need to pit ourselves against laws and regulations that we deem unjust and inhumane? Is now not also a time to consider demanding more of ourselves and of each other and of the campuses where we research, teach, and learn? For those who believe that now is such a time, student activists like Xavier are likely our best teachers.

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