

Writing for Advocacy: DREAMers, Agency, and Meaningful Community Engaged Writing

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This profile examines “Writing for Advocacy,” a pair of Spring 2018 courses designed around community engagement and project-based learning. Supported by a grant from Conexión Américas and the Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition (TEEC), Christian Brothers University (CBU), a regional leader for educating undocumented students, provided a fertile space for a course that leveraged student voices to lobby the Tennessee General Assembly for in-state tuition for undocumented students at Tennessee public universities. Responding to the political moment of uncertainty surrounding DACA and immigration policy, we designed a course focused on meaningful projects designed for public dissemination and presentation, and our group-based learning approach allowed us to meet both institutional learning outcomes for effective writing and research, as well as softer outcomes for socializing and professionalizing first-generation and DACA students. This course offers a model for other community-engaged writing courses to support student efficacy and student persistence.

Through Conexión Américas and the Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition (TEEC), Christian

Brothers University (CBU) received a subgrant to teach a Spring 2017 course titled “Advocacy in Action.” CBU, emerging as a leader for educating undocumented students, proposed a course that leveraged student voices to lobby the Tennessee General Assembly for in-state tuition for undocumented students at Tennessee public universities. However, we were asked to delay until 2018 because our Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students faced an increasingly uncertain future and reluctance to share their status due to the election of Donald Trump. In that year, we redesigned the course into “Writing for Advocacy,” a pair of Spring 2018 courses designed around community engagement and project-based learning. Writing for Advocacy included a special section of first-year writing and an upper-division English elective, both of which met separately for some class sessions and together for many, especially as students collaborated on projects. Students worked in groups to define and respond to problems through public writing and presentations to advocate. This profile describes the community-engaged and project-based writing course we created with our grant. Responding to the political moment of uncertainty surrounding DACA and immigration policy, we designed a course focused on meaningful projects designed for public dissemination and presentation, and our group-based learning approach allowed us to meet both institutional learning outcomes for effective writing and research, as well as softer outcomes for socializing and professionalizing first-generation and DACA students.

SHIFTING FOUNDATIONS: ORGANIZING THE COURSE

With the numerous uncertainties facing immigration in the US, we built a course that responded to this moment of political and humanitarian crisis. Inspired by T.R. Johnson, Joe Letter, and Judith Kemerait Livingston’s “Floating Foundations” model for rebuilding the writing program at Tulane University following Hurricane Katrina, wherein they sought “attunement to a fluctuating present” (2009, 34), Writing for Advocacy adapted to a shifting sociopolitical landscape, one where immigrants’ rights and safety were increasingly at risk. Nevertheless, with twenty-six students, many of them self-identified as DACA recipients, we began Writing for Advocacy in January 2018 to provide a transformative learning experience for underrepresented and first-generation learners. The course met both

hard, measurable learning outcomes—teaching research methods—and softer outcomes—professionalization and socialization.

We designed the course around the TEEC two-day summit in late February, an annual event for coalition members and national partners. In the first eight weeks, our course readings, writing assignments, research resources, and class activities prepared students for summit workshops and meetings. The second half of the semester focused on using the summit's momentum to continue advocating for change through writing. Students drew from ongoing interactions with various stakeholders and developed the self-efficacy to present to community leaders in one of the course's final assignments. The public audience and reception of student work made these networks part of the learning process. In *Writing for Advocacy*, we helped students align our advocacy goals for equal education with their ongoing lobbying efforts on behalf of scholarship programs and campus and regional political organizations. We positioned writing as community engagement, aligning with the definition of meaningful writing offered by Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner: "meaningful writing projects offer students opportunities for agency: for engagement with instructors, peers, and materials; and for learning that connects to previous experiences and passions and to future aspirations and identities" (2016, 4).

SOLID GROUND: STUDENT SUCCESSES

Writing for Advocacy emphasized *kairos* and the centrality of rhetoric as a means for students to understand and to affect their communities. Although our course's object of study was immigration policies and DREAMers, our subject of study, writing, positioned the emergence of meaningful student writing at the intersection of personal aspirations, histories, values, and community wellbeing. Applied to other local contexts, *Writing for Advocacy* could be replicated as a community-engaged and project-based learning model. Partnership with local partners and audiences can be implemented in multiple situations, particularly those where a significant portion of an institution's student body has a personal stake with the course's object of study. Immigration advocacy could be replaced with local initiatives tied into local or state issues. Students in Michigan could advocate for clean water for Flint, or students in Georgia could advocate for

voting rights. We believe Writing for Advocacy's emphasis on public-facing writing, *kairotic* response, and direct community engagement offers a model for meaningful writing.

Our group-based learning approach (students working in groups of five to six students around a particular immigration-related topic) benefitted from our conjoined course model, wherein experienced students served as fellow learners and peer mentors. We built on first-year writing programs across the country that provide peer mentors (Ward, Thomas, and Disch 2010; Yomtov et al. 2017; Holt and Fifer 2018). These programs especially help at-risk students who struggle with asking questions of authority figures because they want to appear competent or pass as citizens. We were motivated by research in the field, but also by Alberto Ledesma's *Diary of a Reluctant Dreamer* (2017), a required course text, in which he describes and illustrates his struggle and fear as an undocumented youth and the joy he receives in mentoring undocumented youth at University of California—Berkeley. In our conjoined classrooms, juniors and seniors steered group work to meet deadlines and created manageable outcomes. That is, their experience helped first-year students work through complex multi-faceted, semester-long projects. We credit this model, in part, for the first-year students' success in the course and their persistence to junior year.

We anticipated that research would play a large role in our students' advocacy work and created requisite assignments. Therefore, we dedicated over \$3000 of the grant money for CBU Plough Library purchases of approximately eighty-five books and films to support research. These materials also allowed our library to become a campus and community repository of materials pertaining to advocacy and immigration. Students used research for every written aspect of their course work: team-written blogs, infographics, congressional one-pagers, and researched essays. We found that a move away from the traditional essay helped students create informed research to shape policy and make change. Students witnessed this model of research and its necessity and application at the TEEC summit. Abigail Cohen of the Data Quality Campaign and Andy Smith of The Education Trust ("The 2018 Education Summit," 2018) demonstrated the use of data and research to argue for policy change. In creating the

rhetorical opportunity for meaningful and researched writing, we broke down the separation between academic writing and public writing. Students initially worked through an idea as a post on their group's blog and then returned to that idea in an individual project at the end of the semester, synthesizing deeper research: first-year composition students wrote white papers; students in the upper division course composed multimodal projects. Their research had stakes. We followed Jacqueline Preston, who challenges us to think of writing beyond narrow academic terms and view it as culture: "To regard writing as culture is to recognize language as symbolic action, the means by which we construct worlds and express realities" (2015, 39). Course writing assignments elicited research, argument, and rhetorical sophistication. Moreover, student writing lived beyond the classroom and the immediate crisis. Writing a letter, op-ed, blog post, or phone script provided students with agency, a way to speak back to those in power and to create meaningful change through their writing. They worked to create the sort of society in which they wanted to live.

One unexpected outcome of Writing for Advocacy was the opportunity to professionalize first-generation students. For most of our students, the TEEC summit was their first professional cocktail party, formal dinner, and networking opportunity. When we outlined the agenda for the event, one student shot his hand in the air and asked, "Do I need to wear a tie?" (Tyler, in discussion with the authors, February 2018). A young woman piped up, "Wait, how fancy is this? Like high heels fancy?" (Desiree, in discussion with the authors, February 2018). Faculty unaccustomed to working with first-generation students might find these questions off putting. We prepared to talk with the students about correct apparel. Our experience and the work of other scholars (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt & Moll, 2011; Rios-Aguilar and Deli-Amen, 2012) recognize the cultural challenges that first-generation students face as they move from a working-class identity and adapt to the taste and style of middle-class norms. For our first-year students, this transition was largely positive. We mitigated culture shock by leaning on the junior and senior mentors. While most of them were first-generation too, they had more opportunities and experience with internships, work, and networking.

Ultimately, we designed the course to challenge students' assumptions about advocacy while empowering them to become advocates. Our approach to the course could be defined as rhetorical advocacy: we wanted students to understand and participate in advocacy efforts from a rhetorical perspective, particularly in relation to the methods, techniques, and genres that make advocacy effective. Rhetorical advocacy differed from protest, another important form of advocacy work in which numerous of our students had previously participated. We discussed the "long game" of public advocacy, when a march alone won't change an unjust law. Helping students think long-term is difficult when their friends and family are detained and deported today. However, advocacy is about raising awareness, shaping local and state laws, and forming coalitions. Academic coursework, too, is about this "long game," so we often stressed that the course aimed to provide the theoretical and rhetorical foundations for a wide range of advocacy situations that sometimes required us to back off and take a broader view.

MUDDY WATERS: TEACHING ADVOCACY

In co-teaching a community-engaged, project-based course, we learned some important lessons about what not to do. We spent too much time on logistics: maintaining the budget, arranging hotel accommodations, reviewing proposals for coach buses, and the like. Most simply, we needed an administrative assistant, as time spent on these efforts took away from the pedagogical aspects of course preparation. We relied heavily on our own networks, especially with alumni and established professional relationships. A university Community Engagement Office, something CBU added after our course, would make this work more efficient. As with any community-engaged course, ours needed months before the course establishing relationships and expectations with community partners. To the extent possible, travel arrangements, guest speakers, and outside events should be scheduled before the course begins by campus staff.

In addition to logistical struggles, we had to slow our instructional pace to accommodate students' workflow. Unlike traditional writing classes, Writing for Advocacy required students to develop

multimodal acumen—including photos, designing webpages, and editing for visual clarity. We never evaluated the writing out of its digital context. We rededicated weeks scheduled for in-depth analysis of class readings to providing feedback or helping students solve coding issues. Additionally, strong student writers in traditional essay formats struggled with a pared down online writing style, and our English Language Learners felt overwhelmed by juggling so many elements in addition to writing in English. To overcome some of these challenges, we provided a grant-funded writing tutor who had experience working with ELLs and digital composition. We reworked some assignments, even cutting a small project, to create time to work through the course's most important writing assignments. Those designing such a course should consider the pacing of assignments, recognizing students may need significantly more time for multimodal composition.

AFTER THE SURGE: REFLECTING ON THE COURSE

Over a year later, we are still processing the course's effectiveness. Recently, Diana, a student from the first-year composition section of Writing for Advocacy, shared her experiences at the 2019 TEEC Summit. She stressed how our emphasis on rhetorical advocacy influenced her research interests as a sophomore psychology major:

I have carried with me the importance of research and advocacy throughout my sophomore semester as well. For my psychology research project, I was able to form my own correlational study where I looked at the mood and attitudes towards mental health treatment between documented and undocumented college students ... There are kids in Tennessee that have experienced the detention and deportation of their parents ... Those kids should not be forgotten. My passion has not dwindled once the class ended. It has only made me realize how I could take the importance of research in advocacy and combine it with the field of psychology. ("My Experiences," 2019 Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition Summit, February 11, 2019)

Perhaps a best-case scenario, Diana found an impetus for further research, so cultural writing created the self-efficacy to engage more deeply in academic work. She understood research to be a

fundamental part of advocacy. Passionate about her community and causes, she remains a protester.

Writing for Advocacy also created community awareness of CBU's initiatives, which opens new possibilities for internships and employment, for collaboration, and for student persistence in college. We transformed a general education required course into a group-based, project-based, and peer-mentored experience. The first-year composition section's success rate (sixteen students started the course and sixteen students passed the course) outperformed general sections of the course. Three semesters later, fifteen of sixteen students remained at CBU, which significantly outperforms our institutional freshman to junior retention rate. Moreover, two of the students in the upper-division section of the course are now enrolled in graduate programs in rhetoric and composition.

Our course introduced an approach to rhetorical advocacy. In a hostile political environment, particularly on state and federal levels, our students learned to contextualize their thoughts, to challenge their audience, and to make themselves mediators of change through rhetoric. Although the short-term political gains of this work might be slight or even nonexistent, the long-term psychological and educational value of speaking up articulates a sense of worth on individual, educational, and cultural levels, and that was precisely what the moment of Writing for Advocacy demanded. And, it is precisely the model we think can be built on in other contexts and places, bringing together meaningful writing and student agency.

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