The illusion of transparency at an HSI: Rethinking service and public identity in a south Texas writing program

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\textbf{THE ILLUSION OF TRANSPARENCY AT AN HSI}  
Rethinking Service and Public Identity in a South Texas Writing Program

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[\textit{The engaged institution}] must be organized to respond to the needs of today’s students and tomorrow’s, not yesterday’s.
Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, \textit{Returning to Our Roots}

\textit{At the new border, the obstacles are in what you can’t see.}
Héctor Tobar, \textit{Translation Nation}

To teach at an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) is to work and live in a place that is both defined and ambiguous. By definition, an HSI “serves” a student population that is at least 25\% Hispanic, and to be eligible for federal Title V funding, at least 50\% or more of that group has to be low income (Hispanic Association 1999-2005). That’s where the clarity ends. Unlike Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs), HSIs do not share a common mission (Kirklighter, Murphy, and Cárdenas 2007; Santiago 2006), but that doesn’t mean there aren’t some common (mis)conceptions about work at an HSI. We’ve spent our first four years as faculty at an HSI in Texas’ Rio Grande Valley with an 86\% Hispanic enrollment (Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness 2007), and we’re still trying to make sense of the language used to describe our university, our students, and our work. While university administrators, local politicians, and happy transplants speak of the community’s untiring work-ethic and artisanship, we also hear students, teachers, administrators, and public documents giving voice to a rhetoric of student deficiency. While we struggle to engage students in meaningful writing
projects driven by their personal intellectual interests, some faculty prioritize students’ adoption of more “academic” ways of understanding. Still others pursue, and support students in their engagement with, border-related projects of cultural reinforcement and reclamation. And in the relevant scholarship we read, we see a promotion of HSI diversity—an understanding that “lived realities are shaded and distinct” (Mendoza & Herrera 2007, 15)—in an uneasy tension with a desire for knowledge of a student body that is ethnically constructed in its identity, preparation, and perspective.

The care, energy, and people that underlie these realities are not our targets; they are reacting in the most productive ways they can to the university they see, to the students they imagine populating it. As writing program administrators, we do the same. At best, we all know that our students, by their very presence on campus, represent a hope of transforming their community through their success at the university, but you don’t have to attend too many faculty meetings or read too many reports on Hispanic education before it’s clear that a dominant vision of Hispanic students sees them as at risk and under prepared. But the students we see every day don’t seem particularly “at risk” or “under prepared.” That vision of our student body is not one we recognize. We can’t say we know that student body.

Of course, we do come to know our students to various degrees each semester through their development as writers, through conversations both in and out of class—even through their absences and silences. As we live and work with these individuals who may assume multiple roles and authorities during their time in higher education, the appeal of the “type” is understandable, especially when we’re mentoring new teachers who need to see a pattern in, and effective responses to, what they’re experiencing. For better or worse, types don’t work for us. With almost thirty years’ collective teaching experience, we think that the rhetorical choices and the inventiveness of writing that we foreground in our philosophies of writing and teaching have probably kept us from becoming too comfortable—with people, forms, situations, or potentials. And the tensions we feel all too often occur between local specifics and global generalities, though we theorize and practice through both. Narratives of lack, cultural singularity, or even the intractable tales of overcoming adversity demarcate an assumed transparency of institutional purpose that we want to challenge here the way we challenge it in committee meetings, classrooms, and hallways. First, we need to unpack that unwieldy phrase.
A university and its faculty depend a great deal on how they meet their students. If students come to the university believing it will make them whole, or they think that the university offers the only worthwhile type of “success,” or if they assume that just being in college will do the trick, they are assuming that higher education is good, fulfilling, better than…. It has a transparent good. But the purpose of higher education, in terms of mission statements, strategic plans, and public relations, is anything but transparent. The various mission statements we craft at every institutional level, regardless of how well they dovetail, are only representations, not enactments, of desire. What teachers do as they try to work in these environments of missions, goals, and outcomes, and what students do with the institutional language that defines their lacks, even when that language is rarely written on their terms, are acts that require systematic reflection so that students and teachers can learn from each other in writing classrooms. In other words, the tensions among various student, teacher, and university narratives of success should be foregrounded in our teaching and programmatic decisions so that we have opportunities to challenge and revise a language of service that collapses difference.

The disconnection between what we say we will do and what happens in our doing is an unavoidable educational and organizational phenomenon not unique to HSIs, but the context of an HSI puts it in sharp relief because of the increased number and power of the narratives by which we try to know our students. When people who define themselves as outsiders—say a new faculty member who believes in and practices a Marxist critique of the university he’s traveled from New York City to work in or a Chicago-born Latina sociology professor who is discovering how “terrible” her Valley undergraduate students are—they will eventually come into contact with a group of naturalized narratives about these students: “We all know why people go to this school—to save themselves from poverty, to escape the migrant past of their parents,” etc. The just-arrived individual confronts an imagined collective of already-heres. Meanwhile, we’re faced with students in our classes every day who don’t necessarily fit into the narratives that the university, and the university with the community, have created for them—through brochures and advertising campaigns, through Presidential convocation speeches, at faculty parties, and throughout the network of secondary schools that
tell students who they are (and are not) before we at colleges and universities even get a chance.

When we think we know why people enroll in a university, then we start to act as if the college, its goals, and the faculty’s goals are transparent—they aim to save students or provide them with what they lack. In the midst of this, there are many stories we cannot imagine, comprehend, or readily categorize. There are rich students from Monterrey who have apartments in town and estates to return to in Mexico; there are women with large families and inattentive husbands who are hoping that a degree will help them find a way to self-sufficiency; there are future teachers who only speak English and have a strong desire to help Spanish-only speaking students; there are very articulate and ambitious students who follow their significant others to the local college; and, as always, there are people who don’t know why they’re at a university, what such a place even exists for. If we can’t know or predict all these reasons for being at the university, it suggests that we can’t know or predict all the ways that students are already engaged with different parts of the community.

Think, for example, of the differences between how students and teachers think and talk about the “real” world. Considering the massive amount of physical, textual, financial, and commercial structures that separate a university from the people that move around and through it and the places that surround it, it’s tempting to re-inscribe a separation between what we do on campus as teachers and what students will do in the “real” world. Faculty can use the “real” world as a fear tactic to scare students into performing now in hopes that the work will pay off in a deferred place more “real” with success and personal autonomy. Students often talk about the “real” world in order to draw attention to how useless some of the required activities in college are when juxtaposed with a future of specialization and perceived arrival. Both perspectives are suspect because they depend on a future we don’t know, a future we can’t know, because we will never approach it together as teachers and students. This is the “real” world as the eternally retreating horizon that we call on when we’re unhappy with our lack of control (over what we study as students or what we want students to accomplish as their teachers).

These powerful “real” worlds are especially important for us, as WPAs, to de-familiarize so we can better work with a diversity of student and teacher experiences. The more we let them go unchallenged, the more
distance our teachers and students assume between public and university lives. Our desire, then, is to build a writing program that reminds us, project by project, how meaningful writing integrates the public and the university without depending on HSI service narratives.

Our job, however, is not necessarily about creating a network by going out into the community and finding people who want to engage with our students. Because we work at an HSI in which most of our students live, work, and study in close proximity to their home communities, our job as public-minded WPAs, in this respect, is simpler than it might be at other schools where students are far from home. All we have to do is learn to tap the networks that are already in place, networks that are already so familiar to the students, many of them don’t even imagine that they’re intellectually relevant or appropriate for a college classroom.

ENGAGING WRITING STUDENTS

We cannot promote a complex understanding of writing and create innovative pedagogies if we couch our WPA work in the simplicity of a common Hispanic identity or set of experiences, needs, and desires. Instead, we must foreground the contradictions of “service” in our public acts as teachers, WPAs, and sponsors of our students’ public discourses. In complicating the illusion of transparency at an HSI, we hope to push ourselves, our students, and writing programs developing in similar contexts to re-consider the ways we deploy heritage-based stories and identities in the rhetorical contexts of first-year writing.

Despite the commonplaces about HSI students, Michelle Hall Kells rightly argues that “What [the HSI] label disguises is the tremendous heterogeneity within these educational contexts […]. What this label risks is essentializing students who share a few historical traits: a linguistic connection to Spanish (past or present), a sociocultural link to Spain (recent or from generations long ago), and the legacy of colonization (as colonizer or colonized)” (Kells 2007, xii). The students we teach are poor, rich, middle class; activist, apathetic; philosophers and wrestlers; Catholic, Lutheran, Mormon, atheist; fluent or marginally bilingual in Spanish/Tex-Mex/Spanglish, English only. But there are some statistics we know about our students at University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA). 86.3% of them are Hispanic, 5.4% White, 5.7% International, .6% African-American, .1% Native American, 1.1% Asian, and .8% Other. In 2007, we had a 13.7% 4-year graduation rate, a
28.3% 5-year graduation rate, and a 32.8% 6-year graduation rate. Most
go to school full-time (67.9%), though a large number go part-time
(32.1%) because of extra-institutional responsibilities, and 92.7% of
our students come from the Rio Grande Valley (Office of Institutional
Research and Effectiveness 2007). These facts bear on our work as
teachers and administrators.

We want more of our students to graduate faster. In spring 2008,
14.6% of our students dropped (or, due to absences, were dropped from) English 1302, the second of the required first year writing
courses. Another 12.1% earned “D” or “F,” and, because of a gen-
eral education requirement, students must pass the course with a
“C” or better. Researchers at the University of Texas San Antonio
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies reviewed hundreds of stud-
ies about Latina/o students and wrote a “PoliMemo” called “What We
Know About Latina/o Student Access and Success in Postsecondary
Education” (Padilla 2008). They found two important things about
Latina/o success that are directly relevant to engaged writing program
work: 1) “Framing educational pursuits as methods by which students
can fight discrimination, enhance ethnic pride, and assist their com-
unities when they return with college degrees can make college going
more attractive to Latino students,” and 2) “Latina/o student college
success can be driven by the student’s ability to create new networks and
maintain old ones, and by relying heavily on old networks. Students who
go at it alone and are unable to create new networks or keep old ones,
do less well” (Padilla 2008). If we’re interested in keeping our students,
mostly Hispanic students, in school, then the writing classroom that
encourages, even requires engagement with their communities and net-
works, can go a long way towards keeping students in school and show-
ing them how they can use those networks to their advantage. The key,
as Jody Millward, Sandra Starkey, and David Starkey note in “Teaching
English in a California Two-Year Hispanic-Serving Institution” (2007),
is “to show students how to negotiate between their different commu-
nities— their different linguistic, familial, class, and cultural identities.
[They] use assignments that allow them to see that the skills or talents
they develop in one arena can support their success in another” (50).

We feel relatively comfortable with the generalization that students at
our HSI are very committed to the Valley and to their families. One of
the first things a colleague of ours told us when we moved to the Valley
was that one of the local valedictorians of a magnet high school had
been admitted with a full scholarship to several Ivy League schools, but would be attending UTPA in the fall because her father wouldn’t let her, as a young Hispanic woman, leave the family and go to school. Several of our best undergraduate students have been very hesitant about leaving the Valley for graduate school despite our assurances that they would fit in and fare well in graduate programs anywhere in the country. For many, the thought of leaving can only be made better by the thought of coming back. Some see the Valley as very isolated; though there are millions living here, geographically, we are cut off from the rest of the state. The closest mega-city is San Antonio, and it is four hours away. Though far too many Hispanic students face overt racism here, there isn’t a sense that being Hispanic makes you significantly different than those around you. Leaving the Valley means feeling like a minority for the first time for some of our students.

Family, especially, is a significant part of our students’ lives. As Beatrice Mendez Newman (2007) notes, “the pull of family cannot be outdone by the pull of educational responsibilities” (22). It is common to have students miss 20% or more of a semester because they’re taking and picking up their younger siblings from school; the student’s brother, who works full-time, needs the family car and there’s no other transportation; mom got sick and can’t watch the student’s young children; grandmothers and aunts are sick, and the student is the only family member to take care of them. “Family expectations,” as Newman (2007) writes, “constantly conflict and compete with academic expectations, a conflict … [some teachers see] … as an apparent inability or unwillingness to attend class regularly, to complete assignments on time,” etc. (19-20).

Though connection to home and family can create conflicts between the academic and the personal and can sometimes hinder our HSI students’ abilities to move through their education in a timely manner, those connections are also a blessing both for the students and for us as administrators. When we taught at a large research university in the Midwest, Jonikka was involved in a syllabus approach that was predicated on writing as social action. The curriculum asked students to investigate their new university communities, find groups or issues that were important to them, and engage in the creation of public documents. As the Assistant Director of that writing program, Jonikka worked with the WPA to create a network of contacts on campus so students would know who to contact to learn about relevant campus issues and programs for their
projects. Most of these students had left their home communities behind to go to school there, and the sheer size of the university and its networks of people meant it could take years to develop those networks on their own. Asking students to do engaged writing at that university meant the WPA had to be more actively involved in the creation of those networks.

At UTPA, we can rely on our students’ already established networks and the openness and ease with which they share their networks with others. A student in one of our classes was interested in shadowing an engineer, but didn’t know any engineers and was nervous about making a connection out of the blue. Another student sitting nearby immediately offered her brother, an engineer, as an interview subject for her classmate, and a project was realized. While it is sometimes difficult to get students to avoid falling back on using their family members and friends as a comfortable default, we have found that our students are able to use their networks to their advantage.

Another dimension of engagement we need to address, especially when projects are public and the variables get increasingly complicated, is time. At our HSI, one could choose to see conceptions of time as defined by such familiar cultural norms as mariachi time, or to pay attention to faculty disdain for absenteeism, or you could emphasize the language of “progress” and draw from the statistics on the average time-to-degree for Hispanic students (a 4-year 13.7% graduation rate compared to 6-year rate of 32.8% in 2007). We suggest, however, that the issue really deserving our attention is how to better conceptualize time and contributions to knowledge for undergraduates who are progressing at different, non-traditional rates. The idea of a university as a “threshold” loses capital when a four-year degree plan takes place over six to ten years but is still accomplished, as is the case with many urban universities which serve their local communities as well. Students at these types of universities often remain engaged in learning, even when it’s punctuated with non-university involvement because of finances, family obligations, etc., because the curriculum and the writing program we’re trying to build doesn’t differentiate between time spent in school and time spent out of school.

Having relationships with students that are not bound by conventional university time standards requires that faculty re-think notions of vacuum-sealed apprenticeship, and that we build our pedagogies and writing projects out of the complexity of students’ lives as learners who are trying to “do” higher education, as future employees who might
benefit from knowing the history of jobs and labor-value across the
globe, as people who may know they are Hispanic but have not always
used that identifying characteristic to define their interests, their ques-
tions, and their direction. One thing we have learned as WPAs working
with students who have extended undergraduate educations is that it
is extremely important to help them do writing projects that have real
effects on a public audience, that create ripples, so that they can see
their time and energy has effect in the moment.

That means our jobs as writing teachers and WPAs become much
more complicated and much more simple. When a student in our pro-
gram was investigating teen pregnancy in Texas, she became lost in the
maze of state government statistics and websites designed for a user we
have yet to meet. Yet she was partly interested in the topic because her
cousin was a social-worker in Austin who was stressed about his lack of
effect on the “system.” Her teacher asked the simple question: “Why is
your cousin stressed?” With a little wariness about her cousin’s appropi-
ateness as a source, the student spent thirteen weeks interviewing him
and learning about an insider’s view of parental irresponsibility and gov-
ernment red-tape. Her design of a workshop project for Valley parents
with pre-teen daughters was a learning experience for her teacher who
knew nothing about social work, for her as a concerned student unaware
of the relevance of her network, and for the social-worker cousin who
thought no one cared about his concerns.

Students like this respond well to writing projects which ask them to
engage in meaningful ways with “public” issues because they see their
value both in and out of our classrooms, because they see those projects
as an opportunity to integrate their lives outside of school with the intel-
lectual work the university asks of them. They have a genuine desire to
make the lives of people around them better and a genuine desire to
find a foothold in the university, and they do those things by rhetorically
theorizing issues that matter to them, often in an effort to advocate for
their families and their communities.

As WPAs, we are excited by our students’ engagement both inside and
outside the university’s walls. We knew, as Michelle Hall Kells writes in
the Foreword to *Teaching Writing with Latino/a Students: Lessons Learned
at Hispanic-Serving Institutions* (2007), that “[a]gency in language does
not begin and should not end in the college classroom” (ix). Reading
and writing texts in traditionally *academic* ways is important to our stu-
dents’ futures, but “[I]literacy education is [about] more than reading
and writing a set of texts. It is [also] a process of cultivating authority within and across social worlds” (xi). Asking students to work on projects that engage them “within and across social worlds” enables them to use what they know and shows them that the intellectual work of the university can be meaningful, that their school lives do not have to be separate from their other lives, and that what they do academically can have direct impact on the lives of those they care about.

ENGAGING THE WRITING PROGRAM

We are still relatively new to our WPA positions here, and over the past four years as faculty, we have listened and learned from those around us. As WPAs, we are still trying to figure out how to work with the different, and sometimes competing, needs we all have to serve our students, and we are trying to figure out how we can all engage in the kind of rhetorical, pedagogical work we’d like to build the program on.

Competing (?) Visions

Our university’s “vision” is to be “the premier learner-centered research institution in the State of Texas … actively engag[ing] businesses, communities, cultural organizations, educational organizations, health providers and industry to find solutions to civic, economic, environmental and social challenges through inquiry and innovation” (Office of the President, 2008). The first-year writing program that we envision calls for just this kind of inquiry-based engagement. The difficulty we face as WPAs is in selling such a vision to our faculty.

Like most universities, we have a range of faculty, most with MAs, a growing number of Ph.D.s, and a handful of TAs. Most were educated to be literature specialists with some creative writing experts. Some have taught at UTPA for more than twenty-five years; a considerable number are new each year. Some grew up in or have become part of the Valley community; others will quickly decide their home is elsewhere. With rare exception, our writing instructors are well-meaning and dedicated, working long hours and sacrificing much of their own quality of life to help our students become better writers, more successful students. But our program represents the gamut of ideas about who our students are, how to achieve our purposes, and even what our purposes should be. The range of faculty perceptions we talked about in the beginning of this chapter emerge sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly, in faculty meetings, professional development workshops, and hallway conversations. The trick for
us is to figure out how to negotiate our colleagues’ diverse narratives of student success, draw out the best of everyone’s intentions, and suggest ways we can capitalize on our students’ strengths in order to build a program that fosters student engagement, supports our university’s vision, and helps our students use writing to good effect in their communities.

There are a significant number of faculty at our HSI who believe that, in order to reach our (mostly) Hispanic students, we should have them read culturally relevant (i.e., Hispanic) texts. They argue that doing so helps students connect to academic life in more meaningful ways. Students can see themselves mirrored in those Hispanic texts, and they can see what’s possible for them if they, too, become educated and respected as a professional. And, no doubt, for some students, this is powerful. If you’ve been told all your life, overtly or implicitly, that you cannot amount to anything because you’re Hispanic, then evidence to the contrary can have life-changing effects. Araiza, Cárdenas, and Garza (2007) engaged in a survey of faculty at their institution, Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, designed to elicit their ideas about what it means to work at an HSI. They argue that

Faculty at HSIs, as well as faculty at any university serving a large percentage of minority students, need to develop a “culturally responsive pedagogy” that is “structured to connect what is being learned with students’ funds of knowledge of cultural backgrounds” [Scribner and Reyes 1999, 203], but these pedagogical decisions must be based on the reality of students’ lived experiences. (Araiza, Cárdenas, and Garza 2007, 93)

The reality of our students’ experiences is that they may and may not see themselves reflected in “culturally relevant” texts. But, at the heart of these faculty members’ intentions, we think, is the desire to give their students confidence, a way to see themselves acting with agency in their communities. We also think there’s a desire, however conscious it is, to have students be able to use their own experiences, traditions, and cultural values as a way to connect life outside of school to the academic world, which, for better or worse, will change them. This means “[w]e must think of [our students] not as objects of instruction,” Araiza, Cárdenas and Garza (2007) argue, “but as subjects of their own local situations, and we must construct classroom environments where they can create agency for their own purposes” (93). We think that projects that ask students to choose their own purposes, their own audiences and genres, and to engage with their communities accomplish both our
goals as writing program administrators who wish to promote meaningful writing instruction and the culturally sensitive goals of some of our best faculty.

We also have faculty who want very much to teach our students “academic writing.” Some are more (current) traditional than others, and some are more sensitive to what it means to teach academic writing than others. But all want to give our students the tools to succeed in their other college classes and the academic literacy that would mark them as educated in the eyes of the larger public, including future employers. As anyone who’s tried to make the argument for rhetorically diverse, multimodal pedagogies knows, it’s often hard to sell the value of “writing” a T-shirt or a YouTube video or even a brochure or letter to the editor. As WPAs, we are sensitive to these faculty’s concerns and are trying to find ways to match their specific goals with ours. Since we don’t believe in a single, monolithic thing called “academic writing,” it is hard for us to imagine devoting ourselves to a pedagogy or a curriculum with teaching “academic writing” as its main focus. We think it’s important that students become rhetorically adept, aware of the kinds of questions writers have to ask in any given writing situation, and aware of the value of feedback, revision and continued inquiry about writing for each new situation. And we think having students work on meaningful writing projects, with a mix of (academic and other) genres, can help students learn when and of whom to ask these kinds of questions.

Collective Vision

For several years (before and since we came on as faculty here), the WPAs and Writing Program Committee have been trying to revise course goals and create student learning outcomes for our program that are more in line with composition theory and pedagogy. We struggled with the wording and perennially got bogged down in the process, so, our first year as WPAs (our third as faculty), we listened and watched as we began teaching observations and monthly professional development on assignment design and response strategies. The next year, we decided it was time to finally make the changes we had been hoping to make, and we were determined to make the process move more quickly and give every instructor a chance to shape the direction and purpose of the program. We were nervous what might emerge in those program conversations because we thought, with so many disparate ideas about teaching and our students floating around in our department, that we would
never find common ground. We were, thankfully, not as right about that as we thought.

During our first “Soup’s On!” professional development workshop of the year (the value of cooking for your colleagues cannot be underestimated), we asked our colleagues to generate a list of program goals and course goals for each of the two required writing courses. We told them not to get lost in wording full statements, just to list ideas. They grouped themselves mostly as we had thought they might—the TAs got together, the long-term lecturers grouped up—but, as each group offered their suggestions to the whole room, a few key ideas were repeated. Each group, no matter what language they used to describe the feeling, longed for their students to feel “engaged” with their work. And so, we had a perfect place to begin.

The next workshop, we asked everyone to say what they hoped students would be able to do, know, and value by the end of the first course; then we asked the same for the second course, focusing, as well, on how the second course builds on the first. Jonikka was able to make connections, as she facilitated the conversation, between the group’s desires and ways to design more meaningful projects that ask students to engage in the kind of work we hoped to build into the program. She turned those notes into new course descriptions, goals, means, and outcomes statements for each course. The most notable change is a new means statement that asks all instructors to require at least one project in the first course in which students choose their own purpose, audience, and genre to compose in. This represents, we hope, an initial phase in the emergence of our engaged writing program.

We recognize that this change, the requirement of at least one “alternative” writing project, will make some of our instructors understandably nervous. The textbooks they have become comfortable with don’t have assignments like these in them; they’re not likely to know yet how to design them. But our plan is to offer examples, not only from our own teaching, but from their other colleagues who are beginning to try this kind of thing, and we stress the importance of a reflective cover letter/essay in which students write about their rhetorical choices. We hope this “meta” work will make teachers who want to teach “academic” writing feel at least a little better about the kind of engagement work we want to ask them to include in their curricula. No one, after all, would think it’s bad for students to work closely with their community, but the argument for how this work helps them become better writers does have
to be made explicit, especially for those who aren’t familiar with recent scholarship in rhetoric and composition which theorizes and calls for engaged writing programs.

ENGAGING OPACITY

With experiences at a small regional university, a Research One university, and now an HSI that is growing rapidly, we’ve witnessed the public vs. private dichotomy played out in a variety of educational contexts, and that dichotomy has been fruitless in all of them when it comes to engaging students and asking them to engage our imaginations as teachers. To foster a culture of inventiveness, we have to actively deconstruct the insularity that a writing teacher might use as a form of defense (against large course loads and packed classes), a means of intellectual survival (to pursue personal research interests), or to make room for one’s “personal” life. Interestingly enough, the more we have opened our lives and time to our students, the easier our jobs have become and the more time we have had to reflect on our jobs as teachers, our lives as parents, and our potential as WPAs trying to build a program that means something to students and teachers beyond the language of core requirements or college-preparedness.

Plain and simple, the public is private and the private is public. The dichotomy is false, and we need to neutralize it with a healthy dose of listening to what we want out of our influence and what our students want in terms of their lives as “public” intellectuals. There are unlimited service-learning opportunities that, to some extent, address what we might call a desirable collapse of the public and private. There is a small world of examples and theories that can consume a secondary area of interest or a primary desire. As WPAs, we know we can’t force service-learning projects on students and guarantee civic engagement, and we certainly can’t force service-learning pedagogies on teachers. But that doesn’t mean we can’t make the university an object of study for the newest student. And we can craft writing projects that make room for public opportunities that can have real-time (meaning within a semester) effects.

At least for us and the teachers we work with, we are negotiating a new pedagogical scene where we stop thinking of our HSI context and start thinking about what any writer can accomplish in a sixteen-week chunk of life divided by family, work, friends, and other classes. The trick is to highlight the complexity of what we’re doing (like studying
how a university works) while simplifying or localizing the goals of our rhetorical creations:

- a t-shirt for a younger brother that speaks to parents about what he wants to do with his life;
- a video orientation made for a mother who wants to go back to school to learn computers but is too nervous to take the first step;
- an interactive website for potential employers to learn about the social and financial benefits of hiring ex-cons through a state-sponsored program;
- a comic-strip addressing the personal fear and administrative difficulties with approaching a financial aid office;
- a University Chutes & Ladders game, by students for students, designed to determine if you’re college material or not.

Our part as WPAs is making the space for writing projects like these, which will challenge at-risk warnings—space where students’ public concerns could de-privatize learning and re-invigorate public networks humming with potential.

Our university is very serious about its mission to serve what it determines to be the unique needs of its “host” community, a place where many young people don’t think of themselves as college material, where the label of “first-generation” is a descriptor for many more experiences, exposures, and positions than just that of being a college student. Many of our colleagues engage in service-learning pedagogies in attempts to connect student life, university study, and community engagement. The university supports these activities, in part, because retention rates are so low and our average time-to-degree so long. We’ve participated in a reading group interested in the rhetorical formations of Hispanic identities, though we were there to challenge what we saw as assumptions more than as truths. We’ve seen new teachers, good teachers, time and again whip out an Hispanic anthology for their first first-year writing class because students will relate to the “stories.” We, like Araiza, Cárdenas, and Garza (2007), just haven’t seen evidence that the problem of engagement has to be framed in the language of lack that pervades the discussions of ethnic identity we have heard and read:
Faculty teaching at HSIs may rely on the prominent discourse surrounding these institutions and Latino/a students for an understanding of the students with whom they work, but that discourse may not accurately represent the reality of the students who choose to enroll at the institution. Most of that discourse employs an “at-risk” tone, so faculty may have nothing to shape their perceptions but this negative discourse.

Araiza, Cárdenas, and Garza (2007) refer to an example of this kind of negative discourse from the 2004 Pew Hispanic Center report, “Federal Policy and Latinos in Higher Education,” which says that “most Latinos/as are first-generation college students, are low income, and have less academic preparation than their peers” and are “less likely to complete college through the traditional path compared to whites and Asians” (88). The negative discourse is compounded by some faculty’s “limited knowledge of the population at the HSI where they teach,” where some “may have even less knowledge of the institution as a whole and how being an HSI shapes the mission of the institution” (Araiza, Cárdenas, and Garza 2007, 88).

People are working hard on solving the “problem” of engagement, but the commonplaces of student identity and cultural value cannot hold. As WPAs, we need to invent ways to make unfamiliarity workable for writing teachers so that designing and implementing meaningful writing projects have more gravity in their first year writing classes. We’ve begun to do this by having monthly meetings that deal in the particulars of assignment design and hold commonplaces like plagiarism and errors at a distance. We’re circulating the projects that our students do that engage public audiences with appealing rhetorical strategies. We’re providing syllabi to new teachers that are built on fewer readings with more discussions and fewer projects with more revision so that both teachers and students have more built-in time to reflect on the work they are doing. We’re writing arguments that offer alternatives to the language of student lack and teacher expertise. We’re trying every day to not “know” our students but to ask them how they want to be “known.” There is no bulleted list of “deliverables,” no theoretical application of this idea to that system. Just a simple question we return to again and again.

_How do we, as WPAs, best serve our writing students and teaching colleagues at an Hispanic Serving Institution?_

This is the question we need to ask as WPAs at an HSI to begin a new discussion of the publics that students already navigate through. We
have to talk more and theorize more about how to understand a border-centric language that promotes a *diversity* of Hispanic experiences and simultaneously calls for pedagogies adapted to Hispanic places and students. We don’t dismiss this language as inauthentic, but the diversity of our students suggests that, in a nutshell, their lives are not just border lives. Their identities are both known and unknowable.

**REFERENCES**


Santiago, Deborah 2006. *Inventing Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs): The basics*. Washington DC: Excelencia in Education.