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Diversifying Knowledge

Presenting and Applying a Framework for Inclusive Graduate Program Websites

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports our experience improving the inclusivity of Utah State University’s (USU) Technical Communication and Rhetoric (TCR) graduate program’s online materials. We report outcomes and implications of a 20-hour project in which Stevens applies aspects of an analytical framework developed by Alexander. In addition to the nine-tactic framework introduced in this report, readers may find value in four takeaways we share, based on our experience applying the framework.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics:** • **Human-centered computing** → Interaction design; Interaction design process and methods; User centered design;

KEYWORDS

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Black Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, Recruiting

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1 INTRODUCTION

To diversify the field of technical and professional communication (TPC), particularly in the academy, we must recruit and retain multiply marginalized or underrepresented (MMU) students, especially at the graduate level. One of the first encounters that many MMU students have with graduate programs is through program websites and online application materials, making this documentation high stakes indeed. However, little research exists to inform the (re)design of graduate program content to be more inclusive—despite the fact that application processes pose hurdles for many MMU applicants [1–3].

Many applicants, particularly MMUs, have little access to insider knowledge. Lacking insider knowledge means having “limited access to institutional agents who advise and mentor students about

graduate school and the different tools needed to successfully navigate the application process” [2, 4, 5] and academic preparedness where implicit cultural knowledge is made explicit to those looking to gain access to the academy [6–10]. So, MMU applicants may be barred from entry into higher education because they lack insider knowledge, such as whom to ask for a letter of recommendation or the criteria by which application essays are evaluated. This paper reports our experience improving the inclusivity of Utah State University’s (USU) Technical Communication and Rhetoric (TCR) graduate program’s online materials. Below we introduce an analytical framework developed by Alexander for evaluating the inclusivity of graduate program websites. In the Background section, we report on a 20-hour project to apply this framework, followed by description of outcomes in the Assessment and Application section. We end with Conclusions and Implications, offering four takeaways for TPC administrators.

2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Educational assessment scholars Rios, Randall, and Donnelly [3] analyzed graduate program websites to improve their utility as recruiting resources for underrepresented applicants, identifying 47 variables they grouped into four themes:

- Theme A: Flexible programming: e.g., online classes
- Theme B: Application information: e.g., what makes strong recommendation letters
- Theme C: Financial opportunities: e.g., assistantships
- Theme D: Program climate: e.g., organizational culture, especially regarding race [3]

Alexander extended this research to TPC, modifying Rios et al.’s [3] work informed by a mixed-method study. Below we introduce Alexander’s 9-tactic framework [11], noting the theme(s) from Rios et al. to which each tactic relates.

- **Provide an anti-discrimination and/or diversity statement¹ (Theme D):** Diversity statements have been critiqued for being merely performative [13], but when they are specific and action oriented, diversity statements can shed light on program climate.
- **Encourage applicants to contact the program with any questions regarding the application process (Theme B):** Programs should provide an explicit invitation to contact the director of graduate studies (DGS) with questions. If graduate students are willing to speak with potential applicants, the website also could include student profiles and contact information.



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¹We acknowledge that anti-discrimination and diversity statements are different. However, in the context of this paper, both serve the same purpose: conveying program climate.

- **List faculty member(s) with social justice-related research interests (Themes C & D):** Faculty expertise informs curriculum and research funding opportunities for graduate students. Faculty research expertise in social justice also sheds light on program climate.
- **Provide potential applicants with an electronic version of the program handbook (Theme D):** Program handbooks should contain detailed policies that set explicit expectations and outline procedures for completing the degree (e.g., how to put together a dissertation committee), as well as problem solving (e.g., how to file a grievance).
- **Provide resources for producing a strong application packet (Theme B):** Program websites should include resources, instructions, and/or examples that convey information such as what to include in the application essay, what makes a letter of recommendation compelling, and what kinds of writing samples would be relevant.
- **Be transparent about the review process (Themes B & C):** Provide information such as ranking criteria, who comprises the admissions committee, and when applicants can expect an acceptance decision and funding offer.
- **Replace the GRE with alternatives that allows applicants to showcase relevant strengths (Themes A & B):** Consider what materials may better showcase applicant strengths unlikely to be featured in other application materials. Or build flexibility into current application materials: e.g., suggesting a range of genres or modalities for the application essay or writing examples.
- **Inform applicants that at least one course promoting diversity is required (Themes A & D):** It is important that curriculum reflect a program's commitment to DEI by including (and therefore legitimating) alternative epistemologies. This tactic can also convey flexibility if multiple courses or directed studies are offered.
- **Indicate the availability of graduate student funding specifically for MMU students (Theme C):** In addition to general funding, such as teaching assistantships, identify funding specifically dedicated to MMU students: not only multi-year assistantships but also one-time funding such as a relocation stipend for incoming students or summer research funding to bridge student income until fall.

These nine tactics offer specific (but flexible!) ways to increase the inclusivity of graduate program websites.

3 BACKGROUND

In spring 2022, the USU English Department hired Stevens for an hourly DEI assistantship to improve the department's website. University websites are notoriously in flux. During the 2020-2021 academic year, USU rolled out new department templates to improve consistency and convey information requested by students, such as career prospects, alumni profiles, and student features. Stevens's duties included reviewing the new template-based website to identify missing or incorrect information, proposing changes to department leadership, and implementing approved changes. Stevens had to receive college-level approval and two-part training on USU's content management system (CMS) to engage this work.

Aware of Alexander's research, Stevens proposed partnering to apply his findings. Given funding constraints and our interest in conveying actionable, applicable research on communication design and DEI, we conceived a 20-hour project to apply Alexander's framework, tracking and reporting the outcomes in this Experience Report. Alexander, Stevens, and Walton met to review the framework and the webpages most relevant to this project. We determined that Stevens would work through the framework, starting with the first tactic, tracking her time by two types of work: assessment (i.e., gauging whether and how well the website already enacted the tactic) and application (i.e., making changes to enact the tactic more fully). She conducted this work in three chunks, meeting with Alexander and Walton between chunks to strategize. In the next section, we report the outcomes of this 20-hour project.

4 ASSESSMENT AND APPLICATION

In 20 hours, Stevens was able to address the first five tactics of the framework. For each tactic, we report 1) assessment—to what degree and in what ways the existing website enacted the tactic; 2) application—the changes Stevens made to enact the tactic more fully or explicitly; and 3) next steps—work that remains after the 20-hour project.

4.1 Tactic 1

4.1.1 Assessment (1 hour). The English Department has a diversity statement, which is linked from the homepage. This statement was developed by a multi-disciplinary coalition of English Department faculty members and user tested with students to reflect the breadth of undergraduate and graduate programs in our department. But specific programs, including the TCR program, do not have their own specific diversity statements. With a program-level scope, such statements could be more meaningfully specific [12], acknowledging culpability in oppression and conveying actions the program has taken to support DEI, conveying program climate. We assess this tactic as **partially enacted**.

4.1.2 Application (0 hours). A programmatic diversity statement should not be drafted individually, and constraints did not allow for coalitional development within the timeframe of this 20-hour project.

4.1.3 Next Steps. Programmatic diversity statements should layer with those at the department, college, and/or university levels—conveying how the specific program supports diversity and enacts inclusivity in ways congruent with the broader organization. To achieve this goal, a coalition will need to collect and analyze applicable diversity statements and work with the broader framework in mind.

During this analysis, the coalition may find genres other than a diversity statement to better signal program climate: e.g., brief videos discussing often-hidden work such as developing a more inclusive attendance policy. If we do develop a programmatic diversity statement, regular review, such as biennial check-ins, can ensure it still accurately reflects program culture and remains congruent with university initiatives.

Additional Questions

The TCR program encourages applicants to reach out with any questions regarding the application process. Doing so can help prospective students assess if the program is a good fit for them and can help applicants put together more competitive application materials.

Please address questions regarding the application process to the Director of Graduate Studies for the English department:

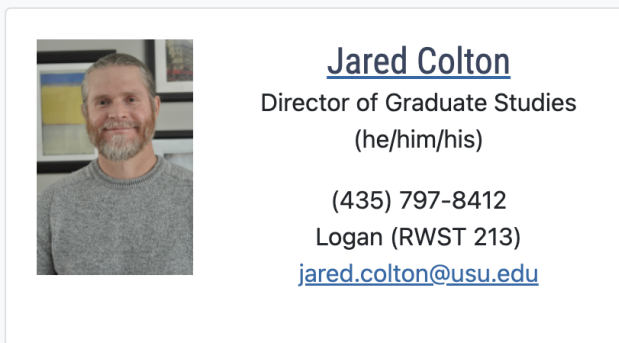


Figure 1: Screenshot showing picture and contact information of English Department DGS accompanied by explicit invitation to reach out

4.2 Tactic 2

4.2.1 Assessment (2 hours). The existing website included multiple mentions of the DGS but no overt statements inviting applicants to ask questions, suggesting topics of inquiry, or identifying whom to address with such inquiries. Because MMU applicants are less likely to approach graduate applications with insider knowledge [4] it is important to be explicit about inviting questions, perhaps stating outright that communicating with faculty during the application process is a norm welcomed by our program. We assess this tactic as **partially enacted**.

4.2.2 Application (3 hours). On the main TCR graduate program webpage, Stevens added a statement encouraging applicants to reach out to the DGS with questions about the program.

The “Apply Now” webpage, which conveys the PhD application process, originally read, “Please address additional questions to the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) for the English department.” That statement is a good start, but it could be improved by identifying the DGS by name, providing contact information, and specifically encouraging inquiries to convey program norms and lessen potential anxiety of applicants needing additional information. So, Stevens added this content (refer to Figure 1).

The existing website included information about only graduate students with instructorships. Stevens created a new webpage featuring all current PhD students, linking to it from the PhD program main webpage. Creating this new page required first creating a directory entry in the CMS for each PhD student and then populating the new webpage with this content. The directory structure is locked at the university level, constraining possible types of information. This constraint prompted a workaround to include information like pronouns (useful for conveying inclusive program climate). Other content, such as picture, email, bio, and publications, was easily added within constraints of the directory structure. The program had requested this information from students the previous fall, simplifying Stevens’s task.

4.2.3 Next Steps. We need to audit the English Department website to identify additional points of contact potentially useful for applicants.

4.3 Tactic 3

4.3.1 Assessment (2 hours). The existing website included quite a bit of information about faculty members: picture, email, title. Clicking on a name or picture pulled up additional information such as scholarly bio, which was not consistent across faculty members, and social justice-related research interests were not apparent from the main faculty page. We assess this tactic as **partially enacted**.

We wanted to expand this information to convey program climate and encourage potential applicants to reach out with inquiries, specifying research interests so applicants know whom to contact. Ideally, the faculty page would convey program norms by inviting students and applicants to contact faculty: e.g., asking faculty what they’re teaching next year, conveying their own research interests, or inquiring about research assistantships.

4.3.2 Application (3 hours). This tactic required the most troubleshooting to enact within the CMS constraints. Stevens hoped to list research interests directly on the main faculty page, but after 3 hours of trial and error, such efforts were unsuccessful, and Stevens moved on to maximize the impact of the 20 hours (refer to Takeaway 3). Stevens added the following information to each individual faculty member page: pronouns; updated scholarly bio; updated title; research specializations (labeled “expertise” due to CMS constraints); and select publications (at least one co-authored with students). Although this information is one click deeper than ideal, these pages now convey program climate more thoroughly.

4.3.3 Next Steps. Stevens will contact the college-level IT department to troubleshoot together, seeking a way to identify research interests on the main faculty page. It will be important to regularly update faculty information to ensure it is consistent, complete, and up to date so potential applicants can develop an accurate sense of program climate as it relates to faculty expertise.

4.4 Tactic 4

4.4.1 Assessment (2 hours). The English Department had a graduate handbook online, but it was outdated and contained policies for only some of the department’s graduate programs. It has been removed from the website. We assess this tactic as **not enacted**.

4.4.2 Application (6 hours). Stevens has spent 6 hours so far editing and redesigning the graduate handbook for improved accessibility and information relevant to DEI initiatives (e.g., support for responding to microaggressions, how to file a grievance, claiming disability accommodations). Most of this content already exists in other documents, though some new content has to be developed by department leadership. Stevens will continue improving the handbook through summer 2022, handing it off for review and approval in fall 2022, with the goal of officially implementing it by the end of spring 2023.

Our 20-hour project revealed some tensions related to this tactic. Alexander's framework suggests that making a graduate handbook available to potential applicants can convey in-depth information relevant to program climate: e.g., if the handbook identifies where students can access support for dealing with microaggressions, that suggests the department is prepared to support students in combatting oppressions encountered on campus. This is an excellent reason to make the handbook publicly available. However, university policies discourage putting information like policy handbooks on department websites, instead requesting this information be shared in a cloud-based storage location such as a Box folder. Putting the handbook on Box allows it to be shared quickly and widely and to be easily updated when policies change.

In contrast, few people can update the department website, which, to be fair, is a public document representing a state institution. Permissions are restricted, and CMS training is required. CMS constraints and limitations of one's HTML expertise pose further barriers. It is little wonder that many department websites are outdated. But outdated, publicly available policies can cause confusion, inconsistencies, and even legal trouble. This risk suggests why the university discourages putting documents such as the student handbook online.

In this tension between the desire to convey program climate and the desire to prevent inaccurate (even misleading) information, we recognize pursuit of what Frost calls "the balancing point" of efficiency: seeking a balance between the best result and the least effort, often prioritizing the latter [13]. But she asserts that TPC should reimagine efficiency as "focused primarily on audiences as a component of best results" [13]. In this context, making the handbook available only on Box requires the least effort, but it may not achieve the best result—especially not for this audience: MMU applicants. So, we are committed to—and optimistic about—achieving better balance: e.g., perhaps posting an abridged version of the handbook on the website to give applicants a sense of how the department has structured student support into our graduate policies or linking from the website to the full handbook saved in a publicly available Box location with view-only permissions.

4.4.3 Next Steps. Stevens will complete her redesign of the graduate handbook. After the handbook is approved, Walton will coordinate with department leadership and stakeholders at the college and university levels to pursue a just balancing point. This balancing point should weigh audience needs above effort while helping the department keep online information updated. We note here the relevance of positionality: As a graduate student, Stevens is well positioned to inform the content of the graduate student handbook.

As an associate dean, Walton is well positioned to advocate for inclusion over other university priorities.

4.5 Tactic 5

4.5.1 Assessment (1 hour). Our existing website already included explicit guidance on what makes for a strong application packet (refer to Figure 2). To give applicants a better sense of the field, the webpage also links to four foundational TPC articles, which are publicly available without a log in (Faculty worked with the USU library to do so without violating copyright.). The application procedures page lists all required documentation, linking to relevant locations on the Graduate School website. It also describes what content to include in the application essay, providing explicit prompts which map directly to assessment criteria used to rank applications. We assess this tactic as **mostly enacted**.

4.5.2 Application (0 hours). Improving upon the existing resources will require new content to be developed by the TCR faculty in consultation with USU groups such as the Graduate Students of Color Association, the Disability Resource Center, and/or the Inclusion Center. Such efforts are possible but not within this 20-hour project.

4.5.3 Next Steps. We need to expand this support: e.g., what makes for compelling recommendation letters: who should write them, what types of content are relevant. We also want this webpage to help change norms by encouraging writers to share their recommendation letter with the applicant. Doing so can boost applicant confidence while also providing applicants an example of a genre that is rarely explicitly taught. Finally, if a person does not feel they can provide a strong recommendation, they may be more likely to decline the request (rather than tanking an application with a lukewarm letter) if they are expected to share the letter with the applicant.

A second area for improvement is building explicit flexibility into the requested writing samples: e.g., identifying a range of genres beyond academic research papers. One possible way to signal inclusion without over-expanding the application instructions could be linking to scholarship on TPC developed by and for various marginalized or underrepresented groups: e.g., documentation for Black family reunions [14]; translation and design of immigration paperwork [15]; online instructions for self-administered hormone replacement therapy [16]; and instructional beauty videos for women of color [17, 18]. Such scholarship could 1) prompt applicants to recognize a fuller range of TPC experience they bring to graduate work and 2) signal program climate by holding up scholarship by and for marginalized communities as exemplary of what we seek in graduate applicants.

5 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

We recognize that universities differ in how website content is produced, approved, and implemented; the exact approach described in this Experience Report will not apply to all institutional contexts. But we hope readers who want to improve the inclusivity of graduate program websites can navigate their institutional contexts aided by this report of our experience, drawing upon Alexander's framework and the four takeaways below.

Overview

The strongest applicants are those who reference the work of our faculty, suggesting how your own interests fit with the focus of our program and convey familiarity with the broader field.

For an overview of the technical communication field, we point applicants to the following four touchstone articles:

- [A humanistic rationale for technical writing](#); Positioning technical communication as humanistic and rhetorical, this 1979 article is one of the most influential and heavily cited articles in the field.
- [Relocating the value of work](#); This 1996 article argues for technical communicators to convey more clearly the value of our expertise, rejecting classification as low-skill support workers and instead embracing and articulating our role as critical information brokers.
- [Has technical communication arrived as a profession](#); Exploring the role of technology in the professional identity of the field, this 2005 article acknowledges the centrality of ever-changing technologies to our work but concludes that "people [...] are the ultimate end, not the technology" (p. 369).
- [Disrupting the past to disrupt the future](#); Winner of the 2018 CCCC award for Best Article on Philosophy or Theory of Technical or Scientific Communication, as well as the 2017 Nell Ann Pickett award, this article calls the field of technical communication to embrace social justice and inclusivity as part of its core narrative. Co-authored by [Dr. Rebecca Walton](#), this article reflects our program's explicit commitment to social justice broadly defined.

Figure 2: Screenshot of guidance on how to create a strong application packet

5.1 Takeaway 1: Doing DEI work requires non-DEI work

The first takeaway is that even explicit, dedicated DEI work may require non-DEI work. Stevens found that some of this 20-hour project, particularly assessments, involved figuring out what changes were possible within CMS and template constraints. For example, she sought feedback from peers on the new graduate student webpage. The initial design raised concerns from a first-year student who welcomed inquiries but worried about having enough programmatic knowledge to help applicants. In addition to resolving the concern (by reordering student entries and specifying their number of years in the program), Stevens also had to develop a workaround to include this information. In other words, to more fully enact tactic 2 (DEI work), Stevens had to solicit feedback (indirect DEI work) and develop a workaround within the CMS constraints (non-DEI work). This takeaway has implications for reasonable expectations of outcomes, timelines, and budgets: optimal enactment of the tactics may take longer than anticipated, especially early on. Relatedly, those who maintain the website may need to split their time between DEI work and general improvements. Based on our experience, we estimate that in a 20-hour project, one might allocate 3-4 hours for technical work that is not DEI specific but necessary for a functional and uniform website.

5.2 Takeaway 2: Pay students to partner in this work

Our second takeaway is to pay students to participate in improving website inclusivity—especially inclusivity of webpages targeted to potential applicants. As former applicants, students are particularly well positioned to suggest improvements. And many TPC students are developing relevant competencies (e.g., inclusive communication, content management, web design), which they can deepen in academic DEI work. We suggest the following possibilities:

- Assessing and improving website inclusivity (the focus of this paper)

- Managing social media accounts
- Updating alumni association databases
- Serving as a sensitivity reader

Regularly assessing graduate program websites for inclusion can enable TPC programs to quickly respond to changing demographics and meet the needs of *all* students. And student funding for performing those assessments can range from multi-year assistantships to short-term hourly positions. Paid DEI work of 5-10 hours per week can supplement traditional graduate student funding packages [4] and may be easier to fund than a multi-year assistantship. Because such DEI efforts support the goals of many university entities, multiple groups may agree to split the funding for these initiatives: e.g., university-level DEI office, the Graduate School, the Office of Research, university communications. And, as demonstrated in this report, even small-scale DEI efforts can produce meaningful improvements—especially when regularly reviewed and renewed.

5.3 Takeaway 3: Regularly revisit and review

DEI work requires iteration. Relevant factors—such as student demographics, university policies, local cost of living, program size—change in ways relevant to the work of inclusion. So, even if a program managed to enact all nine tactics perfectly and fully, that program must still regularly assess its website and other materials. We suggest assessing the program materials annually. At USU we have monthly faculty meetings with shared meeting agendas on Box. We prepopulate particular agendas with recurring items: e.g., scholarship deadlines are in March, so the February agenda reminds us to announce scholarship applications in class. At USU, prepopulating the meeting agenda for a slower month, such as September, is a promising strategy for triggering regular assessments. Other programs may have shared department calendars or other tools appropriate for establishing regular inclusivity assessments.

5.4 Takeaway 4: Faculty participation is essential

The final takeaway is for faculty to commit to DEI work and to recognize that positionality affects how that commitment is expressed. MMU faculty are likely overburdened with DEI work—often unpaid and paradoxically both hyper-visible (e.g., being the only person of color on a committee) and hidden (e.g., emotional exhaustion from repeated microaggressions). Yet MMU faculty are likely to have unique insights into how websites can better support MMU applicants. When MMU faculty have the interest and bandwidth to share these insights, value it! But when they do not, this is when Alexander’s framework can be particularly valuable—offering an actionable tool for assessing and improving the inclusivity of graduate program websites.

We encourage faculty members, especially allies with more privileged positionalities, to be active in improving the inclusivity of online content. In our experience at USU, factors affecting university websites change relatively frequently. In the 10 years that Walton has worked at USU, the program website has been entirely redesigned—different software, different servers, different visual design, different content—at least four times. University design constraints and training requirements have changed as well. But throughout the changes, TPC faculty members have strongly influenced website content and design—because we asked to. Certainly, aspects of university web design are beyond our control, but we have found that a) persistence, b) willingness to do the work ourselves, c) turning such work into a class project or student-faculty collaboration, and d) turning such work into a research project all increase our margin of maneuverability [19] for intervening in web design—particularly for explicitly inclusive purposes. Once such interventions are approved, we have found student experience to be the most relevant information for informing changes: What are their needs? What made their graduate school search and application process helpful? stressful? uncertain? successful? These questions have been helpful for understanding what factors affect their graduate program selection, experience of the application process, and sense of belonging within the program and university at large. But we acknowledge that there is always more work to do (as the assessments reported in this paper make clear). The work of inclusion is never finished.

6 CONCLUSION

We conclude by acknowledging again that institutional constraints differ, but we hope that reporting the outcomes of this project will

help readers recognize the value of Alexander’s framework and provide a research publication useful for buttressing requests for similar DEI work at other universities.

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