Dear Campus Community: Coalitional Public Statements as Positive Permission Structures after the Social Justice Turn

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Abstract: The authors examine the ways that institutional responses to crises provide spaces for institutional critique and reforms. Using a case study of campus responses to the George Floyd Protests in the Summer of 2020 and in conversation with a coalitional approach, the authors carry out an exploratory sequential mixed-method study of the letter corpus using natural language processing and rhetorical analysis. Combining the concept of permission structures from political discourse with Black Feminist Epistemologies, the authors suggest that institutional responses to crises can create positive permission structures that support coalitional change while calling for further reforms.

Keywords: crisis communication, rhetorical analysis, mixed methods, social justice, coalition

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Introduction[1]

As institutions of higher education respond alongside the rest of the nation to social and political events, these institutions must remain aware of the impact of their directives and policies. The global pandemic has only served to underscore the necessity of this self-awareness, as have the conversations, and even reckonings, around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Grace and Tham (2021) tell us that "such unprecedented crises create the need to communicate timely, user-centered information" (p. 111). The ways institutions have cultivated formal responses to their communities have not always been either timely or especially user-centered (Knight, 2020). Equally important in crisis communication is the consideration of voices, stories, and perspectives that make up the very communities these messages are being delivered to.

To understand the role of institutional communication in recognizing, revealing, and rejecting inequities (Walton et al., 2019) to replace it with coalitional communication, we established a case study focused on a pivotal moment of such reckoning: the protests of George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020. Colleges and universities throughout the country responded to the murder of George Floyd with official statements condemning racism, promoting unity, and asking for change. In this article, we therefore highlight both the importance and power of institutional messaging through a close examination of a sample of official statements issued after the murder of George Floyd via a combination of rhetorical readings and quantitative analysis over a corpus from members of a U.S. Division 1 athletic conference. Collecting letters from all of the major universities within a Division 1 conference provides a deeper understanding of the implications of action and calls for change within a grouping of universities that serves as a fundamental comparative mechanism within higher education. Many U.S. schools use their athletic conferences in peer comparisons and administrative decisions, making a natural grouping tool that creates a manageable corpus for close analysis.

Because we find that individuals and universities alike tend to distance themselves from criticism or anything related to accusations of racism or inequity, we opted to decontextualize the geographic region of our chosen conference. As noted in our title, we see this work as necessarily coalitional, which as Walton et al., say, "requires those who are not living at the intersections of oppression to approach change-making with humility, to listen more than they speak or lead; and to sometimes divest themselves of self-serving plans" (2019, p. 134). We propose in this article a reframing of institutional crisis communication as explicitly coalitional and therefore do so with anonymized sources and intentional humility. As White scholars, we recognize the way Whiteness perpetuates and look to Black Feminist Epistemologies and coalition as a means of social justice praxis. For that reason, we use this article to take a step together in promoting actual change that can be better reflected in meaningful, intentional, and — most importantly — tangible socially just statements from our university leadership.

Situating our Work

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[1] This article is a truly collaborative piece, with each author contributing 50% to the final whole.

The all-campus statement or email rose to popularity namely within the May 2020 response period to the murder of George Floyd and continues to be a prominent and interesting genre to consider. As part of a larger and more complex system of university communications, it is helpful to think of this type of all-campus email in terms of what Spinuzzi and Zachry (2000) refer to as a "genre ecology." Spinuzzi and Zachry define a genre ecology as "an interrelated group of genres used to jointly mediate the activities that allow people to accomplish complex objectives" (p. 172). For us as scholars, the ecological framework helps us understand that these genre responses are not static and unchanging — there is not a definitive template for the university crisis response. Instead, each response follows a general, yet evolving, genre format that responds in fluid and evolving ways to specific situations and actors (p. 172–73). In addition to local contexts, institutional statements also live within the larger ecosystem of higher education in the United States, with each institution's statement in response to a given crisis impacting both the writing and reading of future statements by other institutions. In the case of the all-campus email, these institutional messages are disseminated for the purpose of asserting a particular ideology, reaction, or plan to university constituents from university leadership. Though localized, these responses are read through the lens of national and regional responses from a given institution's peers and create reactions that range from local to national, especially if politicians on the regional and national stage take note of a given statement.

In situating this particular genre ecology, it's important to understand the context of the all-campus email in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. The letters that we analyze in this case study were distributed just after institutions of all kinds had begun sending out messages of solidarity and support in regard to the global pandemic. Recipients of these messages had grown used to seeing corporate emails and messaging providing conflicting updates on quarantining expectations, health updates, and often surface-level messages of support and cooperation during an incredibly confusing and ever-changing time in American society. Floyd's murder at the hands of police, captured in a horrific viral video in the midst of this shift in expectations for institutional messaging, at least temporarily awakened the nation's more privileged members to the underlying inequities experienced by those not recognized nor supported by our institutions.

The resulting Black Lives Matter-led protests and calls for action filled our inboxes and social media feeds with a stream of uplifting, if surface-level, messages of unity and concern. Rhetorically, we see a critical move of the genre of the campus statement as providing the protection of the institution's explicit blessing in carrying out social justice work, an important consideration in a political environment where political commentators and state legislatures have attempted to single out scholars and even K-12 teachers for teaching and researching social justice. For some sobering context, the DEI legislative tracker through *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has, as of this writing, tracked 32 different statements enacting some form of dismantling of institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts (Gretzinger et al., 2025). A study released in 2022 by UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (Pollock et al., 2022) focusing on K-12 education underscores the need for institutional mandates and rhetorical support, with teachers citing hostile environments in their districts created by political activism around critical race theory (p. vii). At the same time, teachers with supportive districts and leadership noted the power and protection that vocal administrations and leadership provided them in continuing to offer social justice curriculum without fearing for their job or future within the system (p. 80).

As we embark on an analysis of campus statements on race, power, and social justice, we know that a thoughtful reflection on our own positionality provides "keen insight into the types and amounts of power we may have for taking coalitional action in support of justice" (Walton et al., 2019). We are both White Southerners and have both worked at institutions that have struggled with campus legacies of racism and division during the George Floyd protests and beyond. As White, cis-gendered academics, we carry with us the historical and cultural baggage our status and history afford us. Though one of us writes from a neurodivergent perspective, they pass as a neurotypical White academic. We are acutely aware of the posturing and performative allyship that often occurs when White people in positions of power seek to champion causes of racial justice and efforts to create greater inclusivity (Ahmed, 2012; Colpean & Dingo, 2018; Jennings, 2020). We also fully acknowledge that we are analyzing this work for the sake of inquiry and responding to a situation at our own pace, not in real time as the institutions being studied were required to react.

We therefore see our approach to this work and the methods we've chosen as themselves examples of social justice praxis within the context of coalition making, similar to the early groundwork of Jones et al. as part methodology/part practice (2016). We cannot and should not simply offer our "hot take" on the best course of action if we have no interest or plan to make that change happen and are not willing to tie our own professional positions to these issues. We believe these statements can and should serve to support and call for the work of creating more just, equitable, and diverse colleges and universities. In this way, we see this research as a step toward coalitional action, a "calling in" instead of a "calling out."

To that end, we approach this work with the following research questions:

- What are these letters saying? What rhetorical moves are they using? How are they addressing their audiences?
- Do the sample statements provide impetus for activist work within their respective communities?
- Do the statements themselves give us permission to "be activist" or to actively fight racism, and if so, how?

Literature Review

Central to our approach in this article is Walton et al.'s (2019) 4R's heuristic for social justice. The 4R's approach relies on technical communicators performing four separate but interlinked actions when faced with injustice: (1) recognizing the injustice (and our own complicities in the injustice), (2) revealing the injustice, (3) rejecting the injustice, and (4) replacing the injustice (p. 133). Implicit in this approach is Walton et al.'s (2019) observation that technical communicators either contribute to or reject systems of oppression around us on a daily basis (p. 139). In leveraging the 4R's approach, we position campus statements in response to crisis as technical communication with the potential to perform the 4R's and create more just and equitable institutions.

Permission Structures

In our work, we supplement the 4R's with the theory of permission structures to explain the ways that institutional communications in particular can and should perform the work of sustaining and supporting coalitional work towards social justice on our campuses. Permission structures emerged as part of the political lexicon via President Barack Obama's staff and advisors during his campaign and presidential tenure, with the term becoming part of the news cycle after President Obama used it to describe negotiations with Republican legislators (Holland & Bohan, 2013). Some trace the explicitly political usage of the term to Obama advisor David Axelrod (Klein, 2012; Zengerle, 2008), and the term has since been leveraged in presidential scholarship (Lee, 2013), legal scholarship (Torres-Spelliscy, 2021), and scholarly analyses of the January 6th Insurrection (Schake & Robinson, 2021). Though the term has been used for decades in marketing, we focus on the uses and definitions of political permission structures originating in the Obama presidency because of their salience and origin in the politics of social change.

In the original usage by the Obama campaign, permission structures are — in our eyes — an almost negative formation to give coalitions of voters a path to formation. As Ezra Klein characterizes the concept, these structures consist of things like high-profile endorsements that were rolled out during candidate Obama's run for president to make him into "someone that Ohio steelworkers could feel comfortable voting for. If Ted Kennedy and Colin Powell can back this guy, so can you" (2012). In such a formulation, permission is needed to avoid negative behavior: voters might feel uncomfortable supporting a Black candidate, but not if enough respected figures support him. The permission structure provides a way to get voters — and politicians in the later usage by President Obama — to "do the right thing" (Holland & Bohan, 2013). In this context, doing the right thing is possible because the permission structure has given the target audience the ability to do something they might not otherwise feel is politically viable.

We use permission structures in this article because its origins in discussions of social change in politics provide an interesting perspective into how organizational communication engages with the politics of social change in our institutions and the tension between administrations and local coalitions acting for change. Instead of looking to address the concerns of those in our communities who feel social justice is happening too fast or in the wrong way (concerns that we can trace at least as far back as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*), we look to using permission structures to support and protect coalitions that are already doing good without taking credit for or control of their efforts.

In our definition, positive permission structures in institutional communication function to support existing social justice work within campus culture or explicitly make such work the goal and priority of the institution. In such a formulation, permission structures in institutions and the coalitions already formed within them, are empowered by intrinsic institutional power coming from university presidents and chancellors, providing an institutional mandate that provides justification and support for social justice work within a campus community. As Walton et al. (2019) prescribe, we see these structures as ideally amplifying and supporting the voices and actions of those multiply-marginalized individuals who have been the target of injustice rather than replacing them (p. 143).

Black Feminist Epistemology

As we supplement Walton et al.'s (2019) 4R's approach with positive permission structures, we recognize that many of the uses of these structures, particularly in the 2016 election, centered on the context of soothing the egos of White conservative leaders. While such mind-changing is critical to our social mission, we also want to acknowledge that, as Walton et al. (2019) clearly state, recognizing, even revealing and rejecting, is simply not enough. Instead, replacing such structures with underrepresented ways of thinking allows us to actually realize coalitional practices. Walton et al. (2019) are some of many scholars who are part of the social justice turn that acknowledges the role that Black women and Black feminists have played in cultivating and enacting coalitional practices, which ultimately hold us accountable to be truly inclusive in practice, not merely in name or stated effort. In order to enact coalitional work, or working across and among differences to create real, genuine change, we continue to practice humble listening. As these scholars have testified, we must ask ourselves: what schools of thought are most poised to replace these structures without fear that they will be replaced by more of the same? Licoana and Chávez speak to the power of "relational literacies" as a means to working toward this coalition, interacting with others in order to lead to new ways of understanding and learning. As Pouncil and Sanders (2022) suggest in their recent work on Black futures in technical communication, the work of Black feminists and womanists "paved the ways for social justice through the building of coalitions and centering of Black women's embodied historical knowledges at the intersections of oppressive social systems" (p. 284). Special issues have called for learning from these traditionally othered voices in order to truly make change (McKoy et al., 2022). These scholars are informed by Black women and the ways they have placed lived experiences and stories as valuable sources of knowledge, critical viewpoints that are missing from much technical communication scholarship and serve to actually replace some of these systems with a more critical and inclusive lens. The call to break down the purported "objective" methods of technical communication requires a new way of thinking, and more and more calls point to Black feminism as the way.

Though there are many sources and methods with which to introduce Black Feminist epistemology, this analysis will be working with the tenets established by Collins (2009) in *Black Feminist Thought*. The first of Collin's (2009) tenets, lived experience as a criterion of meaning, asks us to revere personal experiences as a way of understanding the world. The second, use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, seeks a genuine learning from each other, venerating discussion over debate. The third, ethics of caring, emphasizes the importance of empathy and care in order to validate new ways of knowing. And finally, personal accountability involves being held accountable for one's knowledge claims. In many ways, this tenet builds on the others, challenging individuals to use their concrete experiences, use of dialogue, and ethic of care in order to be accountable to make change.

Instead of seeking traditional approaches in how we evaluate information, we must use both personal and alternative ways of knowing. These alternate ways of knowing — to us — signify a critical means of replacement sought as the fourth R of Walton et al. (2019). By applying Collins's (2009) approach to our campus statements (itself, we believe, a coalitional choice), we begin to see these statements both from the coalitional approach that they demand and a more responsible look toward accountability that they must espouse. Our positionality has allowed us to recognize that permission structures provide us with the language to reveal and reject. As we

move into analyzing our campus statement, statements that enact these ways of knowing serve to replace the oppressive practices with intersectional and coalition-led priorities.

Methods

In examining campus statements in response to the George Floyd protests, we make use of an explanatory sequential mixed-methods analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to assess if and how sample schools responded to the protests with the 4R's and used positive permission structures. In doing so, we align with Lawrence et al.'s (2019) efforts to respond to calls in the field for expanded methods and methodologies (p. 299). This approach, as defined by Creswell and Creswell, relies on a two-phase approach to analyze where an initial quantitative analysis is used to analyze the subject matter and the results from that analysis are then used to build and carry out a secondary qualitative review of the materials, where we carefully consider the coalitional work begun by Black scholars such as Collins (2009). As Creswell & Creswell (2018) explain, "the intent of this design is to have the qualitative data help explain in more detail the initial quantitative results, thus it is important to connect the quantitative results to the qualitative data collection" (p. 222). We believe this approach is particularly useful for our use of natural language processing as the numerical data alone from the texts tell at best a partial story.[2] In our analysis of these statements, therefore, we balance both the qualitative discoveries made possible through running data as well as a more careful attunement to Black Feminist epistemological ways of knowing, which have long been taught outside of traditional discourses. It is not enough for institutions to describe pain, loss, and racism in their communities and spaces. Sympathy without the action needed to change institutional norms and support those creating change is meaningless.

Our case study consists of a total of 15 statements from the 14 members of a Division 1 U.S. athletic conference. One school released a short statement and then, after many negative Twitter responses, released a longer statement.[3] We include both statements in our case study. For one university in the conference, we could not locate an upper-administration statement. We have opted to include the most prominent statement (via the school's own web search) regarding George Floyd to provide coverage of our entire target population. Though these are public documents from public institutions, we have assigned each letter randomly in a sequence from UNIV1 to UNIV15 to provide some level of anonymity to individual statements. We make this move to anonymous representation in part to recognize that we, as two White scholars writing after the fact of these events, are discussing these statements and their impact from a safe distance, free from retaliation or criticism from these institutions' locality. We are not interested in drawing out individual institutions and leaders to share blame, but instead looking to learn from these responses to help future decision-makers center coalitional-driven change in their own spaces. Further, we believe that naming of the institutions breaks down the potential of coalitions as it runs the risk of outside critique that would hinder true humility and engagement. We hope this shift from the individual to the letters as a community of universities shared

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[2] Though our qualitative analysis is not necessarily made up of stories, we draw inspiration from recent work by Elliott (2021) and Campeau and Thao (2022) to explore the power of digging beyond the mere overview of the data points and listening to the larger narrative.
[3] To provide relative anonymity, the identity of this institution has been withheld.

responses to crises will allow us to focus on how the texts either perform the work of the 4R's or simply maintain the status quo of injustice. As these letters have been sent directly from the top tiers of university leadership, we analyze them as having at the very least an inherent institutional power associated with the office of the author, providing a visible rationale for social justice work in a given institution.

For our quantitative analysis, we use textual analysis with the R programming language using the quanteda (Benoit et al., 2018), tidyverse (Tidyverse, n.d.), and tidytext libraries (Silge & Robinson, 2017). We then analyze the texts qualitatively via a content analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to further examine patterns from our quantitative examination. To carry out quantitative work in a way that is open to coalitional action, we have made available both our corpus as well as the same tools we have used for analysis via an interactive data dashboard for readers' usage. We hope that sharing this method and access to the same tools we ourselves have used will allow further interrogation of this dataset and help remove barriers that quantitative work can and does present in scholarship. In carrying out this work, we follow in the footsteps of open data advocates in Writing Studies, such as the work of Lindgren and Ridolfo (2020) on the Rhetmap project and Omizo and Hart-Davidson's (2016) Hedge-O-Matic. All of the data analysis tools we use in this article are available for interactive use via a data dashboard, hosted during article submission at https://technicallyrhetoric.shinyapps.io/gf_campus_data_r/. Using the Shiny (RStudio, n.d.) library, we want our readers to see and use the exact same tools and data responses that we have access to.

Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

We make use of quantitative analysis to identify patterns of usage and thought across our corpus of letters that we might well overlook in a qualitative analysis. Simply put, quantitative analysis provides us with an extra set of eyes that provides us with a way of viewing the text that disrupts our contextual understanding of these letters and forces us to view them in ways that we might not otherwise view them. Making use of the *quanteda* (Benoit et al., 2018) package, we initially created a simple word cloud to help visualize the overall texts, as seen in Figure 1. We focused on aggregate data patterns rather than patterns within individual letters to analyze the responses within the context of their shared conference relationships.
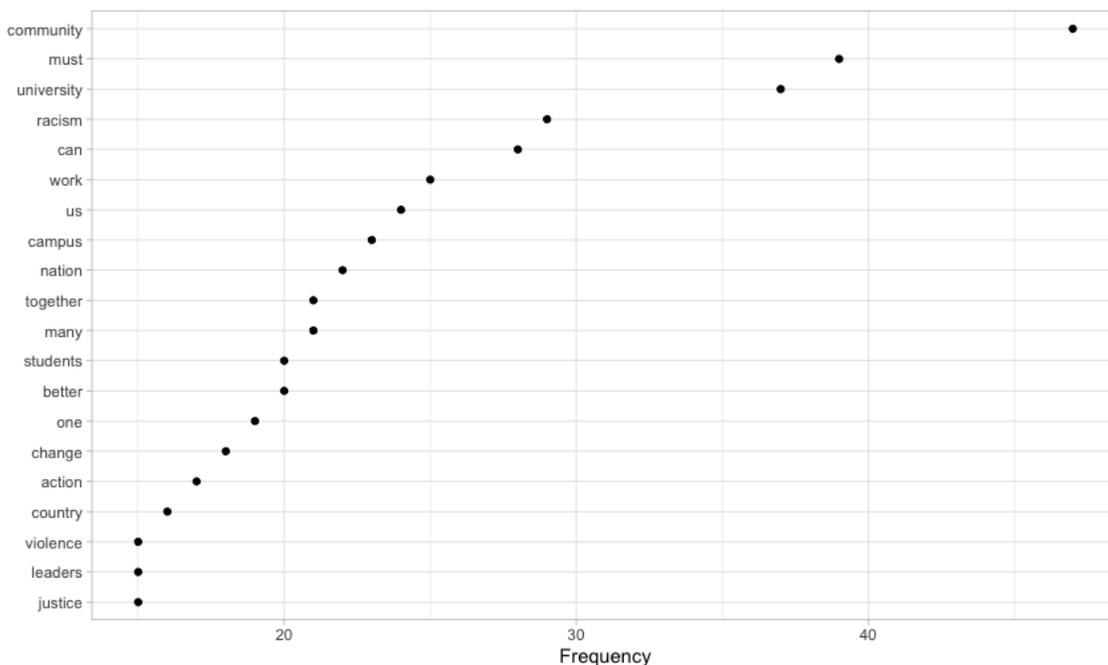
Figure 1: Word Cloud of campus statements

Central to the word cloud created from analysis was the verb "must." "Must," when compared to secondary terms such as "can," "need," "support," or "change," to our eyes seemed to underscore a sense of urgency and necessity that we found encouraging in the face of the George Floyd protests. Having made this initial observation, we expanded our analysis to see if the pattern was meaningful when compared from different qualitative perspectives.

We next go deeper into the data by tabulating the exact count of each term and charting those usages across the corpus. While word clouds can be useful as tools for textual analysis, we use a quantitative count of each term to get a clearer sense of how common each term is across the corpus, something that word clouds can at times make difficult in exact terms.

The most frequent terms in all letters can be seen in Figure 2 below. The most common terms by a large margin were "community" with more than 45 uses, "must" with nearly 40 uses, and "university" with over 35 uses. The next tier of uses was closely matched: "racism" and "can."[4]

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[4] As a note, all of these terms were what remained after the removal of quanteda's default "stop words" list.

Figure 2: Most frequently used terms

Having looked at the corpus as a whole, we next drilled down to the level of individual texts to see to what extent the global patterns of usage were mirrored across each text. Interestingly, we noticed that, while "must" was the second-most used term across the corpus, it ranked highly in usage counts in only in a handful of the letters: UNIV6, UNIV3, and UNIV12. Other statements' first verb lacked the same sense of necessity, as seen in Figure 3. These alternative first verbs such as "witnessed," "want," and "can," aligned more closely with the idea of possibility rather than necessity.
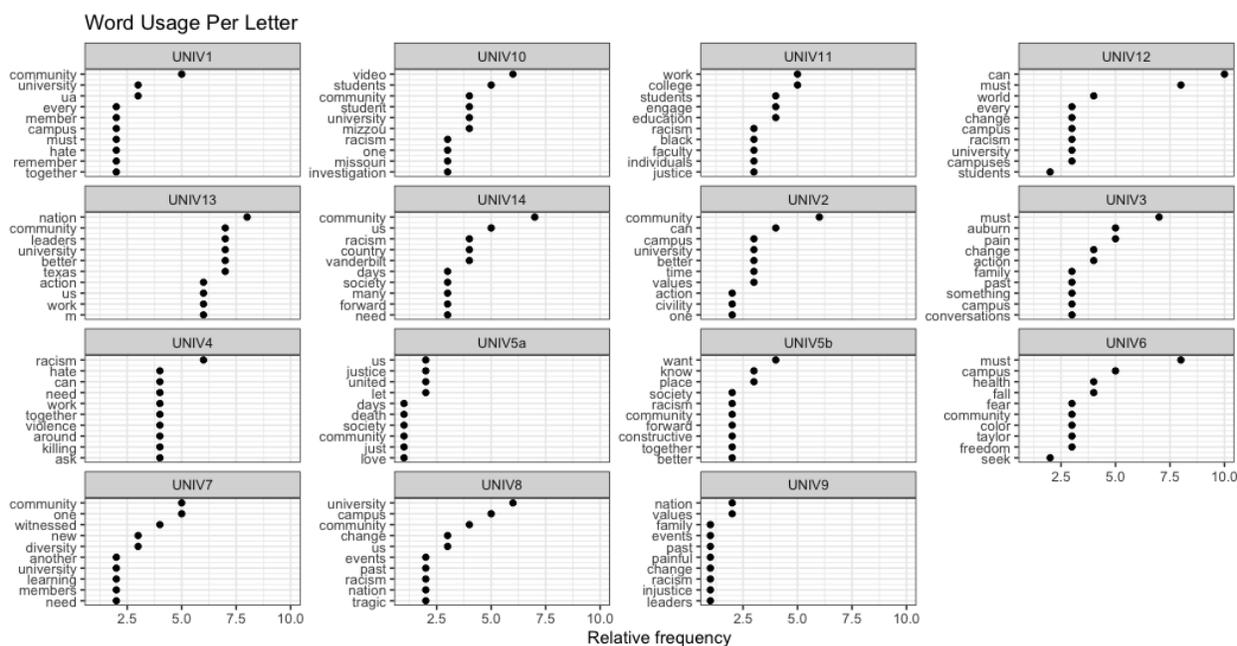
Figure 3: Word usage per letter

As illustrated in Figure 3, of the 15 responses, three (UNIV12, UNIV3, UNIV6) use "must" as their first or second most-used word, with a fourth (UNIV1) using "must" within their top 10 terms, but not as their first or second most used terms in the letters. "Must" did not feature in the top 10 terms of any of the other universities. Statistically, this means that only about 26% of the letters studied wrote in terms that implied action was necessary.

The juxtaposition of "can" and "must" for us was immediately interesting because of the differentiation between these modal auxiliary verbs addressed the possibility versus the necessity of action. Modality in auxiliary verbs is "centrally concerned with the speaker's attitude towards the factuality or actualization of the situation expressed by the rest of the clause" (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 173). Modal auxiliaries are primarily distinguished via three dimensions of their grammatical function: strength, kind, and degree (p. 175). In this brief analysis of these two terms and the implication of their usage in the letter corpus, we focus primarily on kind and strength as they provide a window into the differences between uses of "can" and "must." With kind, modals are primarily broken down via analysis of their contextual usage into epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modalities. Epistemic modals are used to express qualifications of knowledge — a form of hedging — as seen in work on the subject by Omizo and Hart-Davidson (2016). Deontic modals alternatively function to obligate or prohibit, with a root in the Greek term for "binding." In deontic uses, the source of authority, power, and compulsion is referred to as the deontic source. Dynamic modality by comparison refers to "properties and dispositions of persons." Context, in all analysis of kind, governs the classification of a given modal (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 178).

With strength, modal verbs can focus on necessity or possibility, with necessity representing a stronger form of modality than possibility (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 175–6). Broadly speaking, "must" functions semantically as a strong modal focused on necessity, but in certain contexts, it can be pragmatically weakened, as in the example that "you simply must watch this film" (p. 176–7). By way of contrast, "can" primarily functions as a weaker modal focused on possibility — even deontic possibility (p. 182).

We argue that campus crisis response communications, by virtue of the power vested in the authors of these letters, skew toward the deontic rather than epistemic usages of both "must" and "can," with "must" representing a deontic necessity or obligation and "can" representing a deontic possibility. When a campus leader writes to their community in response to a crisis, we argue the kairos of the situation positions that leader as a deontic source, a source of authority that is now addressing the crisis at hand. When a campus official says, "we *can* defeat racism," they are expressing that they do not doubt the possibility. This is something that is possible. "Must," in the same context, "we *must* defeat racism," reflects a deontic necessity: an obligation put onto the hearer by the speaker that action is required.

Reading a response to systemic racism and the murder of a Black man at the hands of the police, we are struck by the contrasting modal strength of "must" and "can." Between these high-usage auxiliary verbs, one primarily exists in the realm of necessity and the other in the realm of possibility. Even with an assumption of a deontic usage, these two auxiliary choices represent a strong linguistic contrast between referencing action related to these events as possible versus

necessary. This distinction and the primacy of these modal verbs in the corpus, for us, is quite telling when read across the history of status-quo maintenance vis-à-vis racism in American higher education. Viewed through the lens of permission structures, terms like "must" indicate the absolute necessity for change in existing practices. The word not only demands action; it extends at the very least a tacit protection over those carrying those actions out at the behest of the deontic source. In contrast, "can" represents a fundamentally weaker approach to the tragedy of George Floyd's murder. Even in the deontic usage that underscores that the possibility of action should not be doubted, it is still primarily concerned with the possibility of that action rather than treating action as a necessity.

At the end of our quantitative exploration of the data, we formulated two research hypotheses for our qualitative review:

1. Campus letters that lack "must" or foreground definitional terms (non-modal verbs) will lack positive permission structures within their context.
2. Campus letters that prominently use "must" will provide the impetus for campus activism within their context.

Qualitative Analysis

We next took the findings from the quantitative analysis and tested them via a qualitative content analysis of the letters, looking to see if our pattern held and if any other patterns of rhetorical positioning arose that contradicted our initial postulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). What, if any, differences in content emerge between the letters that primarily use "must" versus the letters that primarily use "can"? Our shift to a qualitative read was informed by Walton et al.'s (2019) 4th R: replacing these oppressive structures and behaviors. As stated in our literature review, this replacement can and should have coalitional influences, such as Black Feminist epistemologies. To achieve this sense of groundedness, we sought patterns, listening and identifying ourselves in the ways in which universities choose to comfort or sustain their campus communities (Licona & Chávez, 2015). The first pattern we identified, which we term *definition-oriented statements*, merely evoke a sense of change by plugging in important words and phrases that suggest a priority on diversity, equity, and inclusion without the accountability to back it up. These statements, we found, evoke a sense of "more of the same" in terms of simply reiterating, again and again, the harmful structures that keep us as a society from moving forward. We also coded statements into what we term action-oriented texts. These statements invoke a call to action in the spirit of Collins' (2009) ethic of personal accountability. In addition to highlighting accountability gaps in purely descriptive letters, we also leverage Ahmed's (2012) observation that statements that denounce inequalities or merely espouse diversity serve as a stand-in for the status quo within a given institution, preventing or at least hedging against the need for future actions and change. Rhetorically, such statements deal with the problem at hand by either defining inequalities as bad or defining diversity as good but fail to move into a call for change that is necessary.

Description-oriented letter analysis

In our close reading of the description-oriented group, we found we could separate out one subset of texts that used their letter to positively define the home institutions as representing and valuing diversity while shying away from explicit calls for action or change. By incorporating "positive" diversity terms that decouple statements from actual calls for change, we found that these institutional statements prevent a university community from moving toward a positive permission structure.

UNIV7 and UNIV9 are two examples that represent, for us, the phenomenon of positive description absent calls to action. Faced with a crisis in race relations in the United States, these schools spend their responses primarily describing how inclusive, diverse, and un-problematic they see themselves. UNIV7, for instance, writes that:

> Ours is an inclusive community that is welcoming and supportive of all students, faculty, staff and guests. Diversity is fundamental to [University Name] mission and the university is committed to creating and maintaining a living and learning environment that embraces individual difference.

The quoted sentences clearly articulate a framework for valuing diversity and finding diversity within the university community, but the letter does not pair that description with imperative calls to action. Further, the statement of values is expressed in the abstract without consideration of lived experience as a criterion of meaning (Collins, 2009). Such a broad use of the term "diversity" without a real application of the term to university life — which we see in the below examples — defines diversity as laudable but lacks a sense of compulsion or necessity that spurs communities to action; these statements sing the praises of diversity without engaging with a plan and call to make that part of the lived experience on campus. In a word frequency analysis of terms such as "diversity," "values," and "inclusion," UNIV7 relied on diversity 3 times in their short statement, and the use of "inclusion" once.

UNIV9 leans into the positive words associated with diversity, with the author writing, "I challenge all of us to hold fast to [University Name] core values of diversity, inclusion, tolerance, and respect for others and to strive together to assure that those values do not waver or change." This idea of core values as a reminder of institutional identity allows the statement to posture toward a positive permission structure without actually doing the hard and ongoing work of being held accountable and pushing for change. Further, statements like both of these suggest an ethic of care that perhaps resides at surface level instead of diving beyond performance and into action.

Beyond UNIV9 and UNIV7, we also include UNIV13 within the blanket of positive description, though the university's letter does not heavily invoke the terms of diversity and inclusion. Instead of focusing on the necessity of action and accountability, the letter simply restates the existing university mottos as a panacea to racism without specifying how these mottos and ideals should enact necessary changes:

> As a university, as a community and as a nation, we must remember that our history and our future are informed by the values that guide us and the ideals that shape us. Honor. Integrity. Respect. And selfless service to each other and all of those around us.

Though the text strays from diversity-specific language, it makes the same rhetorical move to self-promote and describe in lieu of calling for and supporting action, dialogue, or accountability. In our review of these texts, we find that the use of positive diversity terms often occurs alongside uses of "community." Ahmed (2012) terms words like this as "comfortable" words, saying:

> The fact that diversity is not a scary word is part of the problem: if it is detached from scary issues, it is harder for diversity to do anything in its travels…the comfort of diversity is defined as a form of hiding, a way of not having to think hard thoughts (p. 66).

Through the lens that Ahmed (2012) provides, these statements are feel-good replacements for actual calls to action, calls that can and do provoke difficult discussions and decisions within our institutions. Though these comfortable words present as moving toward equity and attesting to change, they ultimately lack a call to action beyond the status quo.

Just as we discovered that campus responses were quick to use positive diversity words to reveal their affiliation, others were just as quick to separate themselves from negative words that implicate them as being anti-social justice. These "denial of racism" letters focus on describing what a given university is not and what it does support, working to deny the university is racist while underscoring that racism is bad. These denouncements give communities a rationale for moving away from historical patterns of racism and violence without creating positive replacements.

Our first example of the use of a denial of racism, UNIV8, states: "I stand with you in declaring that hate, prejudice and racism do not have a place on our campus or in our society." UNIV1 uses positive self-description in saying, "As president, I pledge to continue promoting a safe and respectful environment for every member of our campus community, and to support those who are particular targets of hate and racism. We will continue to do more and be better because of the efforts and kindness of our incredible students, faculty and staff." UNIV2 addresses the tension surrounding policing and police in stating:

Policing, though, is only one touch point where bias and systemic inequality may appear. We can make a difference by working even harder at [University Name] to promote an inclusive environment where equity, opportunity, representation, and civility are not just valued, but practiced and rewarded. That takes more than observation. It takes leading by example and action.

A content analysis of such claims allows us to see the disconnect from Collins's (2009) call for personal accountability. By denouncing negative uses of race and racism, universities are separating themselves from the racist identities and ideologies that these terms hold. Bonilla-Silva (2003) points out that instances of denial or minimization of racism such as this ultimately allows what he terms "new racism" to thrive in a post-Civil Rights world (p. 72). We might see

where such a use of these diversity terms sets the university up for Klein's (2012) (negative) permission structure in that it allows them to maintain the status quo by simply stating or denying issues likely facing the university. These statements put out the fire without creating a plan to rebuild the landscape ravaged by its flames.

Call to Action Statements

We next turn to call-to-action letters, which can be identified by their ranking of "must" as one of the top terms used, and by the general sense of deontic necessity found in these texts that obligates action. In contrast to the primarily descriptive texts, these texts demand action and create positive permission structures within their campus communities by recognizing the need for action and demanding such action take place.

UNIV6 uses "must" eight separate times, the most of any word in the letter, and uses only four words more than twice in our analysis. The qualitative findings support and extend the quantitative analysis as the university both demands action and underscores that descriptive work alone will not affect change. The university explicitly addresses the emptiness in certain words and statements in saying "Dialogue is not enough. We have to do what we can, now, to find these solutions." The statement shifts into a plea to action, telling students "We need your help to move from necessary dialogue to imperative action." Interestingly, they explicitly use the term "dialogue" as a means to move toward action, "find these solutions." This direct acknowledgement of the use of dialogue as a means of uncovering new knowledge claims falls directly in line with Collins's (2009) epistemologies, asking us, in the spirit of the 4Rs (Walton et al., 2019), to replace these claims with action. Further, they close by saying, "In reinventing our campus, we have a chance to reinvent and reimagine our community. We must take it." Though the university did not include in their statement a list of actions, such a direct use of imperative requests allows for a level of accountability necessary to truly promote change. In addition to their uses of "have" and "must," then, we find the most power in statements as a whole that work to implore the campus to actually make a change.

Our second example, UNIV3, uses "must" seven times and follows the established pattern of pairing the use of deontic calls to action with an explicit disdain for a lack of action. UNIV3 incorporates the use of must as a list of sorts of action items that must be factored in:

> We must be honest with each other and recognize the discrimination against African Americans and other people of color exists and is wrong. There is hate that is festering. We can and must do something about it.
> We must remember that silence is not acceptable. When we see something wrong, we must speak up.
> We must treat all people with respect and civility as individuals, not as groups.
> We must demand that all laws of the land are administered fairly and equally.
> We must listen to the voices of those who have been disenfranchised and do what we can to help.

As with our previous two examples, we see within these statements the creation of a positive permission structure within the university, especially within statements such as the discussion of

silence: "When we see something wrong, we must speak up." Though not a university-specific action, a directly applicable example provides urgency to a move for genuine change. There is also here an acknowledgment of the need to hear lived experiences when they state, "we must listen to the voices of those who have been disenfranchised." As Collins (2009) tells us, listening to lived experiences as a means of creating knowledge claims is critical for replacing the status quo with new and historically unheard knowledge claims. These types of statements create an expectation of change within the institution and provide explicit rhetorical support to change within these universities.

In our final example, we have UNIV12, a letter that makes use of "must" a total of eight times. UNIV12 pushes for explicit change rather than describing it or describing the current status quo. In UNIV12's letter, the focus centers on the promotion of action in asking, "What can we do? We can act and advocate...we have the power to enact change. We have a responsibility to do our part to recognize hate, condemn it wholeheartedly and work to eradicate racism once and for all." This university totaled eight uses of the word "must" in their statement. For context, the letter used "can" in addition to "must" ten times, "world" four times, with all other terms used three times or less. While the presence of "can" as a top term could indicate a primarily epistemic rather than deontic approach to change, our qualitative analysis found the letter did indeed focus on deontic calls to change as the other two letters heavily using "must" did. These examples promote a sense of action and urgency that is then backed up through the incorporation of urgent word choice such as "must." As with the other letters, the university's text creates a positive permission structure that calls for change and demands action. The "power to enact change" that they acknowledge is a call toward personal accountability.

UNIV12 in particular highlights the idea of systemic change and permission structures in their closing where they write, "In the past, [University Name] has done some things right, and we've done some things wrong. We need to do more. We will work together, and we will do better." Here, the incorporation of "must" through the use of "need" creates a sense of urgency in the letter that is not found in the majority of the letters studied. The idea that "we will work together, and we will do better" suggests a sense of community that might allow for the use of dialogue and the ethics of caring so critical to Black feminist epistemologies (Collins, 2009), whose use we've established is critical to consider in making actual change. The terms chosen and the overall tone suggests a deeper introspection and commitment than the checklist-type approach that Ahmed (2012) and others have critiqued. Walton et al. (2019) tell us that replacement ultimately requires "coalitional thinking" (p. 143), de-emphasizing the individual and harnessing the consultation of others. We see the beginnings of this work in these call-to-action statements and hope that such an awareness is a step toward true change.

Our qualitative exploration of the data, therefore, reinforced two truths about our research hypotheses:

1. Campus letters that lack "must" or foreground definitional terms (non-modal verbs) will lack positive permission structures within their context. They do this specifically by either incorporating positive (yet empty) diversity terms or distancing themselves within the statement from negative diversity terms.

2. Campus letters that prominently use "must" will, within their context, create space for campus activism. This is revealed both in the sense of urgency the use of "must" provides as well as the connections to Black Feminist Epistemology — namely accountability and dialogue — that these statements explicitly draw.

Discussion

We ultimately found that the letters either centered around a demand for necessary action with terms such as "must" or instead centered around description of the status quo, or the possibility of potential action. We recognize that revealing injustices is an important part of the 4R's approach to social justice, but when the descriptive letters are placed alongside the letters that leverage a deontic necessity via "must," the contrast is too stark for us to ignore. Within these letters, we found positive permission structures that demanded and supported the work done within campus communities, providing support and protection for the social justice work on these campuses. Within the rest of the letters, we could not locate such supportive language. As noted in the description-oriented letter analysis, we found a subset of those letters could be created by separating universities that primarily self-described as anti-racist and universities that primarily described racism and racist acts as problematic. As noted previously, we found these texts at best fit the original sense of (negative) permission structures, and at worst simply focus on maintaining the status quo on campus.

Akin to the "thoughts and prayers" reactions after mass shootings, the description-oriented letters can be read with very little rhetorical force or institutional backing. Much like the primarily performative feedback sessions and mechanisms studied by Simmons (2007), all too many of these letters can (justifiably) be seen as providing recognition and sympathy without providing any real mechanism or mandate to implement changes.

We were disheartened to find only five of the letters that we studied made use of a call to action framed through a sense of deontic necessity. Too few of the letters rhetorically presented the issue of racism as something that their universities were compelled to address, with the majority of the letters content to simply describe the problems of racism without taking the step of making action necessary.

Though it's outside the scope of this analysis to assess if these institutions followed up with the sense of urgency and necessity provided in their use of "must," such an urgency, we feel, is a step toward personal accountability. Institutions must go further than recognizing tragedy — they must provide the necessary rhetorical infrastructure to truly create the coalitional systems we need to keep moving forward.

In carrying out this work, we want to stress that while our qualitative and quantitative approach can be valuable in helping us see the larger patterns within this corpus, we must also answer the call of our field's social justice turn (Walton et al., 2019) by re-orienting our ways of reading and hearing these statements to consider personal accountability and alternative knowledge claims. Exploring the overarching patterns that a close rhetorical reading might observe allows us to consider how we might recognize, reveal, and reject injustices, understanding the true coalition

change these statements could enact and the power of the words our institutions invoke when they respond to tragedy.

We argue that calls to action are important in university communications not only because of the markers they lay down for the university community and the larger context of the university, but also for the rhetorical space they create within institutions and the protections they provide to vulnerable members of our community. While a university's letter demanding that change "must" happen does not create change in and of itself, the letters, we argue, provide an invaluable rhetorical space/umbrella for action within the university community. They create the positive permissions structure necessary to lay the foundation for coalitional change.

As Walton et al. (2019) do in their own work, we hope these structures and the concept of positive permission structures can provide technical communicators with language and rationale for approaching communicative statements in ways that create space for and support existing diversity efforts. In future work, we would like to examine the ways that these permission structures are maintained organically within communities via shared vocabularies, values, and texts. Walton et al. (2019) remind us that "replacement requires the consultation of others, the humbling of one's own idea about what should happen and how a problem should be addressed in light of what others say" (p. 143). Therefore, we also believe a broader analysis of the national responses to the George Floyd protests by institutions of higher education would provide a valuable counterpoint to our small case study.

For practitioners, we believe there are some simple and effective lessons to be learned from this corpus of university statements. Institutional leaders must take care when drafting responses to racism and injustice to avoid language that removes exigence from themselves and their institutions. Instead, leaders should take care to insert deontic language into their responses, creating permission structures that support and shield members of their institution from individualized criticism while demanding change. We believe that it is imperative that institutional leaders recognize that they can and should use their positions to provide rhetorical space for coalitions to form and thrive in response to crises. Without strong leadership, in both statement and action, coalitions can fall prey to individualized targeting and pressure from outside forces. However, when leadership provides a clear permissions structure and stands behind that permission structure, they can take and respond to criticisms rather than those more vulnerable members of the coalitions they are supporting.

We close here with the words of Ahmed (2012), underscoring the importance of words and how our intuitions make use of them: "If we do things with words, then words can also do things to us. We don't always know what they will do" (p. 75).

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