

Disempowered Minority Students: The Struggle for Power and Position in a Graduate Professional Writing Program

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Abstract. To meet the complex realities of our contemporary society, academic programs in technical writing should examine diligently the current lack of African-American participation and explore possible ways in which programs may be marketed, revised, and shaped to meet the expectations and needs of potential African-American students. This study used individual interviews with five African-American women while they were pursuing graduate degrees (MA and PhD) in a professional writing program. With a theoretical framework of positionality and agency theory, this article describes with detail how these women faced complex challenges: choosing such a degree program, learning needed academic and career skills, negotiating invisible racial difficulties, and creating support systems for themselves. The article concludes with suggestions for creating programs that may be more amenable to the challenges faced by minority graduate students, like the women in this study.

Keywords: African-American women, minority graduate students, position, agency, power, powerlessness.

In the professional and technical communication field in which we regularly talk and research issues of globalization and internationalization, we rarely focus on our local and national diversities. One area in which we might seek to engage with the lives of African Americans is in our academic programs and courses.

Seemingly few students applying for and enrolling in technical writing programs are African American, despite the fact that graduate technical and professional writing programs are increasing in number across the nation. As reported by Rachel Spilka in 2007, few African Americans enroll in technical writing programs, even fewer in such graduate programs. Across the nation, the lack of African-American participation in technical and professional writing programs is a serious issue, suggesting a field

with narrow interests and a career path that may overlook the interests and expectations of African-American communities and students. Moreover, published research about African-American participation in professional and technical writing programs is rare. This lack of full social representation in our academic program enrollment and in our scholarship is disheartening: it suggests that efforts at recruiting more students of color and of offering scholarships to students of minority backgrounds have little effect. It also suggests that recruitment efforts alone may not be enough to more suitably engage with the interests and needs of diverse student populations. To meet the complex realities of our contemporary society, academic programs in technical writing should examine diligently the current lack of African-American participation and explore possible ways in which programs may be marketed, revised, and shaped to meet the expectations and needs of potential African-American students. We should ask ourselves how we can build on the strength of diversity within our own programs in order to become known for our research and scholarship in African-American research interests. We should ask ourselves how we can re-structure and re-design our programs to make them more attractive and effective for the goals and interests of our local African-American student population. If we can find ways to make undergraduate and graduate programs attend to and address the interests of the African-American community, we can strengthen our programs, can help improve the lives of the potential students, and can enhance the field of professional and technical writing.

The following study explores with in-depth, qualitative analysis some of the challenges faced by minority students as they participate in graduate programs in technical and professional communication. The statements from these students' interviews show that issues of power and position are key to understanding the complex and challenging lives led by minority students seeking to empower themselves through higher education, including to what extent minority students are positioned and can position themselves to better access knowledge, to engage in collaborative support systems, and to empower themselves for choices made in academic degree paths.

Previous Research

In recent years, some attention has been given to studying the issues of minority students in higher education. For example, Frances Stage and co-authors (2003) report that African-American students often face significant frustrations with academic life, especially in predominately white

institutions, because they have to struggle with such issues as low institutional expectations, lack of informal faculty contact and support, and less than hospitable social environments. However in regard to the specific field of professional and technical communication, when we look at African-American student issues of recruitment, retention, and graduation, very little research has been accomplished. Spilka reported at the 2007 Conference on College Composition and Communication on the dearth of African-American students in professional and technical writing programs. She suggested that two reasons may account for this lack: African-American students are not introduced to the field of technical communication or have no knowledge of it as an academic pursuit or career aspiration, or that these academic programs may be seen as too stringent and demanding for minority students who may be perceived as having little aptitude or preparation for fields that require superior literacy skills. Spilka suggested that perhaps the field needs to change its approach to recruiting and teaching students of color. Another partial reason for the lack of African-American participation in the field of professional and technical communication may be related to what cultural technological scholars call the "technological divide," which splits the American population between those who can afford and who are at ease with computerized technologies and those who cannot afford and do not use computers. This divide is typically along racial lines, as Adam Banks noted in his book, *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology* (2006). Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher's (2004) book, *Literate Lives in the Information Age*, reveals more disturbing trends in the "digital divide" indicating that while much of this divide broadly occurs along simple racial lines, it is also a divide that runs deeply through familial generations, so that as one generation encounters technological inaccessibility because of racial and socio-economic status, the future generations may also continue this same divisional trend. Such studies show us that academic programs that incorporate technological use and access must be very aware of racial, socio-economic, and generational trends in that use and that these same programs should try to counteract the current divisive technological trend.

Moreover, published research in the field of professional and technical writing about African-American issues, such as career opportunities, history, and community engagement, is also rare, although some is available. In 2004, in regard to technical communication among minority students, Emily Thrush argued that "it is startling how little research has been done on subcultures within the United States" (p. 424). In 2003, Lee Brasseur closed her cultural critique of visual technical information by

calling for future studies to provide “a more prominent place in the technical environment for the views [of minorities and those in lower socio-economic status] to be heard” (p. 150). In the past decade, some studies in the field of professional and technical writing have begun to show how technical writing may impact the lives of African Americans, drawing attention to the history, the communities, and the career opportunities of African Americans (Haas, 2012; Moore, 2013; Williams & Pimental, 2014). For example, Miriam Williams’s rhetorical analyses (2005, 2010) of ante-bellum regulatory documents reveals that the purpose of these documents is less to protect the rights of all citizens, and more to protect the rights of the upper-class; Williams also reveals that many of these same rhetorical strategies may still be used in current regulatory documents. In another study (2009) of city pollution policies and the documents used to propose, enact, and support those policies, she and Daisy James show how minority neighborhoods are impacted by these policies. They provide details about the public forums held by the city of Houston on the development of its clean air policies in public forums. Such research is important not only by what it reveals in analyzing technical documents, but also in what such research tells about people who are impacted by these technical documents, especially the disempowered positions of many minority people. In her 2013 commentary, Williams acknowledges the growing body, although still small, of research and teaching of ethnicity and minorities in professional and technical communication, and she hopes that in future scholarship issues of race, ethnicity, and social justice will be researched by scholars of all races and will address other fascinating topics . . . As we embrace this research, and as our field becomes more diverse, I urge you to also consider courses, at the undergraduate and graduate levels, that . . . give students the opportunity to wrestle with race, ethnicity, and technical communication. (p. 91-92)

This new foray into research about technical communication and minority peoples is vital and highly promising, yet the small number of studies that speak directly about the challenges faced in improving the participation of minority students in graduate programs in professional and technical communication is troubling.

A few recent articles explore issues of racial and ethnic diversity in professional and technical communication, three spear-headed by Gerald Savage. Specifically, Savage and Natalia Matveeva (2011) acknowledge that although much important work has been accomplished to address issues of age and gender in the field, issues of race and ethnic diversity

(specifically, native tribes and people) have often escaped our notice. With Kyle Mattson, Savage (2011) argues for a much more sensitive and nuanced way of understanding the term diversity, and they argue that while much research shows the benefits of including issues of diversity and multiculturalism in the curriculum of higher academia, such benefits do not necessarily exist simply by increasing the enrollment numbers of minority students. Instead, we need thoughtful curriculum and pedagogies that seek to create these benefits and that seek to benefit all students, rather than focusing on the enrollment numbers alone. Savage and Mattson surveyed schools and colleges about their goals for increasing diversity in their student body, faculty membership, and curriculums; the results of their survey showed that many academic programs are quite aware of the need for and the challenges faced in creating greater academic diversity in their technical and professional communication programs. Another article later co-written by Savage, along with Natasha Jones and Han Yu (2014), reported on the progress that many programs were making in recruiting students of diverse populations, noting, however, that much work still remained. Despite their acknowledgement of the challenges facing recruitment and retention issues for increasing the number of students of minority status, none of these articles, however, describes with detail the kinds of challenges that minority students face when participating in these programs. This study answers questions about what it is like to be a minority student in a professional and technical communication program. Such questions, which guide the research of this study, include the following:

- Traditionally, a graduate degree has been viewed by society as a path to empowerment and success. Thus, does, and to what extent, a graduate degree in technical and professional communication help (or hinder) minority students succeed in empowering themselves?
- What are some of the challenges faced by minority students who try to move into positions of advanced knowledge and careers in technical and professional communication?
- Traditionally, family support systems are often integral to a student's ability to succeed in college. Thus, does, and to what extent, family support help or hinder minority students seeking to earn advanced degrees in technical and professional communication?

- Can the answers to some of these questions be used to help us redevelop our field and our academic programs to make them more amenable to minority student success?

To add to this nascent and much-needed conversation about diversity in technical communication, this study addresses a small group of students, African-American women, who have been traditionally marginalized and disempowered in society in regards to both race and gender.

Theoretical Framework of Positionality and Articulations

To interpret my findings in regards to issues of power and empowerment, I turn to postmodernist theories of positionality, agency, and connections, particularly the cultural studies theory proposed by Stuart Hall (Grossberg, 1986). A decade ago, Nancy Rounder Blyler (2004) explored Hall's definition and construction of power in her article identifying critical interpretive research. From her understanding of cultural studies, she theorizes that power may be productive, not just repressive, and that power is situational—always dependent upon its relationships to other entities (p. 145). While much of her article is strongly focused on research methods and methodologies, her use of Hall's theories is pertinent to any study that engages questions of power and culture, and that attempts to explore social practices "in relation to one another, because significance and meaning result from the connections among practices in specific situations" (p.146). Stuart Hall's theory of power and ideology is based on a dyadic use of the word, "articulation," which implies the British notion of linkages and connections (i.e., an articulated lorry or truck connected to a trailer) and the linguistic notion of speaking with meaning. In an interview with Lawrence Grossberg (1986), Hall defines articulation:

the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. . . . the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be re-articulated in different ways because they have no necessary belongingness. (p. 53, italics in the original)

This theory is particularly useful for thinking about academic programs, because it theorizes that ideology and power are not necessarily determined by socio-economic status, class, or social position. Power and disempowerment are not unchanging. For teachers, this theory

undergirds what we do. If power and disempowerment can change, then people, like students, who find themselves at odds with the current powers that be, may find ways to re-articulate their positions and the ideologies around them. If people can change, then people can learn. Thus, rather than seeing power as static and repressive, as other Marxist theorists like Foucault might do, using a theory of articulated power, we can research how power is situated, changing, connected, broken, and re-connected in our programs and in our students.

Hall's theory of articulated, situated relationships of power parallels that of, perhaps unknowingly, the psychological theories of positionality, proposed by Rom Harre' and Nikki Slocum (2003). Originally a practical psychological method of resolving disputes, positionality theory now is used to help many researchers understand how meaning and power are enacted. In this regard, researchers consider the relative positions of people within certain situations and scenarios, situations that Harre' refers to as "story-lines." For conflict resolution, analyzing how people enact their positions within certain stories helps therapists, and the patients themselves, negotiate the changing of one's position and story. Thus, in positionality theory, power is enacted within the relationships between people, positions, and possible stories. If a person takes a position of leadership or expertise, and the other people in that story/situation act as if they accept that person's expertise, then the positions of both parties create the power of that person. As Harre' and Slocum state, "the rights implicit in one's positioning oneself in a certain way serve to position someone else or some institution in the correlative position" (p. 106). Then, to recreate different power structures or positions, or to resolve disputes about power, the parties tell different stories, or, in other words, take on different positions, with different rights and obligations.

To parallel this theory of positionality with Hall's theory of articulation, power is enacted in the articulations between the positions of people, the agents and actors of the stories. Both of these theories—that of articulation and of positionality—are theories that view power structures in a dynamic regard (van Merkerk and van Lente, 2008). For, if power structures are acted upon based on the positions of people, and if people can change the power dynamics by changing their positions, then power is situational, changeable, and socially constituted in the relations between people, not in distant, static, pre-determined abstractions of socio-economic status, like caste systems or a fatalistic view of power. That is, power is contingent, not constant; constructed, not conferred; created, not conceded. Further, these theories of articulations and positionality

allow us to see people as agents participating within powered structures. Thus, agents have the ability (i.e., agency) to create, change, and re-create by re-articulating positions the systems of power in which the agents reside. These three terms—agency, articulations, and positions—are of great importance when exploring the powerful academic systems in which many traditionally disempowered people, particularly African-American women (twice marginalized by race and by gender), participate. In some ways, these same terms (actors/agents) and theories (the mutability of power through the changing positions of people) are reminiscent of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), in which changing relationships between actors (sometimes people) and material things are examined and described. However, ANT is often best put to use when describing existing structures, rather than examining causal relations—the why and how relationships developed and redeveloped; moreover, it is often used to describe the influence and act-ability of non-human actors (machines, technologies, tools, etc.) in their relationships to other elements of a network or system. While ANT is an exceptionally good analytic method for understanding some material-semiotic relationships, other theories (here, positionality and articulation theory) may be better for understanding human motives and actions, especially those studies that seek to answer why some network relationships exist and how they can be changed; this study seeks to move beyond an ANT descriptive analysis of the relationships between minority students and the higher educational system, in order to understand why and how these minority students negotiate their positions within traditional power structures. How power can be re-articulated in traditionally powerful institutions, like academia with traditionally asymmetric positions of power, is an important consideration for those of us who work in academic programs. This study, then, attempts to explore African-American participation in professional and technical communication and is my attempt to answer the question of how I can participate in changing the traditional power structures to help improve the learning and lives of minority people.

Research Methods

This qualitative study, based on interview data, explores the perceptions of five African-American women in a graduate Professional Writing program, a program situated within a larger English department. Their participation in a graduate program of any discipline suggests that they were attempting to improve their lives, in effect to attain some measure of power in their academic pursuits and through that, to strengthen their

social status. In 2007, I received a small research grant from the Council of Programs in Scientific and Technical Writing (CPTSC) to begin studying the issue of African-American involvement in the field of professional and technical communication, a proposed study that was also approved by the university's IRB committee. Five African-American female students, Felicia, Paula, Roberta, Wendy, and Winona, (pseudonyms, as per IRB policy), in the Professional Writing graduate program at a large, southern, urban university were interviewed in the spring of 2008. I recruited these women from the list of then-enrolled students, in which six identified themselves as African-American women (one student was unreachable). Two were finishing an MA degree, one was mid-way through an MA degree, one was nearly finished with her PhD, and one was newly finished with her PhD. All women were between the ages of 25-35 (see table 1).

Table 1: Age and education backgrounds of study participants

Name	Age	Current degree sought	Prior degree obtained
Felicia	32	Recently finished PhD in Professional Writing	Bachelors in Journalism
Paula	30	Finishing MA in Professional Writing	BA in Pre-Law
Roberta	24	Beginning of MA in Professional Writing	Bachelors in Education
Wendy	28	Finishing MA in Professional Writing	2-3 years course work in biology and computer science; BA in English
Winona	34	ABD in Professional Writing	2 years coursework in biology; BA in English

Each interview was conducted either in my office with a voice recorder, or by email if the individual was not living nearby. The interview questions were broken into three sub-sections: family background and demographic information, general academic information, and information specific to the field of professional and technical communication. These field-specific questions asked these women about their reasons for

choosing such an academic path, the problems they encountered along the way, their perception of the program, and the reasons why they were successful in their academic pursuits (for a full list of questions, see Appendix A). Each live interview (3) lasted approximately one-and-one-half hours, and the voice recording was later transcribed and coded according to concepts of power, position, and articulations. In the coding process, I tended to work with large, conversational segments, like lengthy responses to questions or brief anecdotes or examples used in their responses, as the interviewees referenced issues of power, position, articulations and linkages, rather than by small phrases in which the word “power” or “position” might have been mentioned. This type of analysis builds on articulation theory, in which the coding themes address issues of positionality—how meaning is derived from the position of something in relation to its context—the linkages between thing and context. For example, when Felicia responded to the question about difficulties faced in her graduate program, she stated “. . . and about half the time it was not my personality that turned people off, it was people I was associated with, and by the time I figured that out, it was too late. I was either praised or knocked down, and that was it.” This sentence reflected positionality in regard to her relationship with other people, and it reflected an understanding of self-power (or rather a lack of self-power), in which she was unable to change people’s perception of her, because “it was too late.”

Admittedly, the study has limitations, most notably that of the small number of participants, which certainly precludes any generalizable data. However, these were the only African-American women simultaneously enrolled in that program at that time. In a study seeking, in part, to understand the dearth of minority students in professional and technical communication, having only a few participants makes some sense. Further recruiting participants from other graduate programs in professional and technical communication would not have given the same level of detail about a single program, as was gained in this qualitative study. This study does not offer generalizable findings; instead, it seeks to share some insights gained through its qualitative, content analysis of the interviews in which the five minority students reported the challenges they faced. Yet, results of this study do suggest that much more research, both qualitative and quantitative, should be attempted so that program developers can learn how to develop more supportive programs and how to recruit more diverse student populations.

Results and Discussion

The results of this entry-level foray into the issue showed that these women, from traditionally disempowered populations, had remarkable experiences and expectations that are often overlooked in the ways in which we structure our graduate programs. All of the women expressed very positive qualities about higher academia: they had a high sense of self-esteem and held high expectations for themselves and for their families. Mostly, they were thrilled to be a part of a research study that hoped to bring to the forefront their unique challenges and accomplishments in the field of professional and technical communication. In reading through the interview transcripts, three themes of power repeatedly appeared in these women's interviews: 1) nuanced themes of power in relation to family roles and positions, 2) articulations of self-efficacy in regards personal and professional power, and 3) articulations of relationships to friends and academic support systems. These concepts of power and position prompted my deeper reading of the theories of power and positionality so as to better understand some of the more nuanced ways in which power is experienced by these minority students. In all, these nuanced perceptions of power, or lack of power, show those of us who construct and build academic programs how much more can be done to help minority and other traditionally disempowered students learn and achieve success in our programs.

Articulations of Family Power

In their interviews the women were asked general, demographic questions about their families' educational background; thus they were free to expand on the topic of family involvement in their own educational pursuits, as well as on their parents in particular. Their responses reveal a complex view of family influences and support, with encouragement and expectations of earning a college degree, but having received little specific advice or help and no encouragement to pursue careers in professional and technical communication.

Of these graduate students, three were raised in two-parent households, and two students were raised solely by their mothers. Of the five students, all of their mothers had attended college, although only two of the mothers completed a college degree. In regards to the fathers, only two fathers attended college, but no father earned a college degree (see table 2). One interviewee spoke of strong bond with her mother for emotional encouragement and support, while two other students spoke freely about the help they received from their sisters. One other

interviewee who didn't mention a sister talked more about being supportive of her brother who had experienced "learning development problems early on," and for whom his "high school diploma is still his most important piece of paper." Two of the interviewees were less vocal about the maternal influence in their academic pursuits, seeming almost reticent to mention their mothers or fathers, even when prompted. All of these women expressed very strong family expectation for acquiring a college degree, although three of women said that they did not receive much support from their mothers or parents for getting admitted to college or for wisely selecting a career path.

Table 2: Information about maternal and sisterly involvement in college pursuit

	Parent(s) attended college?	Parent(s) finished college?	Sibling support?	Family expectation for college
Felicia	Mother attended; Father did not	No	Gave to brother	We just kind of always knew we were going to college. My parents told us that there was elementary, junior high, high school, and college, even though my dad never went and my mom didn't finish, even though she did attend for a couple of years. But, for them, it was not an option that high school was the end. College is the end; what you do after that is your business. If you want to keep going, or if you want to get a job, okay that's nice, but for them, raising us was getting us through college. But, I can't ever remember ever having any focused conversations on it. It was just kind of an expectation mentioned here and there.
Paula	Mother attended	Mother earned BA	No siblings	My mother always told me that I was going to go to college. She went, and my aunt went. It was just what was going to happen.
Roberta	Mother attended	No	Yes	My sister went to college, and that was like an expectation for me to go.
Wendy	No mention	No mention	No mention	I was only told to go to college by my parents, but there was no preparation. Grade school did not prepare me either.

Winona	Both parents attended	Mother earned MA; no mention of father's having completed college	Yes	I also was driven to complete college because my mother had done so. I never considered another post-high school goal.
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What is notable about these responses is the extent to which these women held the expectation that a college degree was both a measure of achievement and prestige, as well as their unwillingness to break that family expectation. A college degree was ironically both a way to earn a type of social power, but without having to be powerful enough to break the family expectation. Particularly noteworthy are Felicia's and Winona's comments about their own power for achievement: Felicia remarking that she "was always a high achiever," and Winona stating, "Giving up was not an option." However, while all the interviewees spoke of an unbreakable expectation that they attend college, none of them chose to major in English or professional and technical communication as their first choice in college. Instead, they were encouraged by the family to pursue degrees in fields that would earn good money or professions that would bestow a type of power and privilege on them, typically law or science. The choice to pursue a degree in professional and technical communication was made individually; see table 3 for descriptions of their degree choices.

Table 3: Reasons why they chose a degree in Professional/Technical Communication

	Descriptions of choice to study Professional/Technical Communication
Felicia	BA, MA in Communication. I wanted to go into television broadcasting, but after my Master's I think I just kind of hit that quarter-life crisis that a lot of people in their early twenties just kind of have. And, I was just kind of depressed, and that was kind of difficult, but not school wise. When I didn't have a job or anything in communications, I applied for the PhD program in English, because my mother attended school here.
Paula	The summer of 2001, I was a program director at the YMCA, over youth programs, and then in May of 2002, I resigned that job to go to law school. And, so I was there for a year, and I came back in May 2003. And, I decided I always wanted my Masters in English, so I just jumped into that. So, this is how I got there.
Roberta	BA in education. After I got my BA in education, I decided I really didn't want to teach because I don't have much patience with children. I wanted a job with [named a large, well-respected, local logistics company], but I needed more training. So, I decided to get my MA in Professional and technical writing.

Wendy	I majored in biology, psychology, and computer science before I turned to English. Who, if anybody, helped you? I went to career counseling at the [university]—did not help. My parents wanted me to major in computer science because I could make more money. No one really helped. I just had to remember my passion—English.
Winona	I had majored in biology for two years before changing my major to English. I had no idea that I could have then prepared for a career as a science writer. Instead, I planned to teach college English and write novels. After my first semester of graduate school, I took a break and learned about different career options for me. I then found a master’s program in professional writing and thought about pursuing that degree, but I decided to finish the program that I had started. Later, I took a technical editing class to see if I would like the work. I loved it, and I did well in the class. I then applied for a Ph.D. program in professional writing.

Here it is noteworthy that four of these women describe that choice of professional and technical communication in terms of remembering how much they liked literate acts of reading and writing, with Winona stating that she thought “many African-American women love to write.” Roberta did describe her choice of an academic major in terms of preparing for a specific career. Winona and Paula later stated how much they loved doing editing, with Paula lamenting that she would probably always work in a teaching career, but what she really wanted to do was to be an editor. Rather than seeing professional and technical communication, and an advanced graduate degree in such, as an articulation of power and professionalism, they tended to see their choice for professional and technical communication as a fallback, after their first failed attempts to pursue the powerful, financially rewarding and prestigious careers their families had chosen for them. In regards to positionality and articulations, as theorized by Hall and discussed earlier, these women’s experiences reflect the tenuous sway of family relationships and familial expectations. The experiences show strong family encouragement for college degrees and to see college degrees as an avenue for power and prestige, yet the women’s choice of a graduate degree in Professional Writing was not the kind of pursuit encouraged by their families. While the connections between college and power and between family and student were powerful and recognizable, the choice to pursue a graduate degree in Professional Writing required each woman to choose against the career path envisioned by her family. Thus, the articulation of familial power was undeniable but not inviolate in these women’s experiences, which shows that for each of these women, they re-articulated their family relationships in choosing their own educational path.

Articulations of Personal and Professional Power

In terms of positions of power, these women seemed more likely to describe themselves in terms of power, rather than seeing the field as a powerful position. For example, they tended to describe themselves as “high achiever,” “school person,” “highly competent,” “intentional,” and with action-oriented verbs: “decided,” “chose,” “planned,” “researched,” “prayed,” “jumped right in,” and “did it myself.” In describing the field, rather than seeing power and professionalism as inherent qualities in professional and technical communication, they saw it as a broad field with diverse options; in other words with many possible articulations for them, some more powerful than others. Wendy stated that her goals for her degree were “to write proposals, and maybe open up a continuing education school for literacy, [Then] receive a PhD and travel the world teaching the profession.” Winona remarked:

The field is diverse. It involves editors, writers, instructors, and some other professionals. Depending on the task to be completed, it may require extensive technical knowledge or simply the ability to decipher and convey technical information. . . . Within the past year, I have obtained a position that involves the type of ‘high quality’ work that I would like to do.

For these two women, the advanced degree opened many possible avenues in which they could pursue future work and livelihoods. They could articulate their degree to certain types of work, like research, editing, and writing, moving and re-articulating as career situations around them changed. In terms of Hall’s articulation theory, the knowledge gained in the pursuit of an advanced degree in professional writing could be connected for a time to certain types of career pursuits, then re-connected to other pursuits. Such ability to articulate and re-articulate one’s career and degree seems both appealing and empowering to these women. However, while both of these interviewees saw the field as broad and diverse with many different opportunities, Wendy, however, seemed to struggle with a view of herself as not prepared for those positions:

I do not feel as if I have adequate knowledge to achieve anything in the field. . . . Students need to know what jobs are looking for in a person with a professional writing degree. We need to be marketable.

In this statement, Winona seems to be expressing disappointment in her college classes, as well as a measure of disappointment in college in general. Perhaps she perceived a college degree as something that should bestow knowledge and marketability onto the student, rather than

seeing herself as an active pursuer of that knowledge. At the end of her MA degree, Wendy was neither satisfied with the amount of learning that she had experienced, nor in her own ability for independent learning: "I should have made an appointment to talk to someone to find out if the program would meet my needs," she stated. Winona, however, seemed more at ease with a sense of incompleteness of a college degree, that a college degree does not always mean a full expertise in a career:

One lesson that college teaches is that options abound. Many of my friends do not think like college graduates in that they do not realize that they can set a course for their future and follow it. A college degree by itself does not translate to an enjoyable career. It is just a starting point. College graduates must ensure their own course by being intentional.

What is striking in both of these comments is the disparity between their identities as powerful people and powerful learners: Wendy did not see herself as having achieved a position of power, whereas Winona was much more positive about her abilities. Moreover, Winona perceived her PhD degree as just one of many powerful articulations open to her, but Wendy was more likely to see her MA degree as an articulation that did not give her any special skills or experiences, much more as a passive recipient of the knowledge that a college degree should hold, rather than in descriptions of empowerment. The disparity in their view of their own learned competencies might stem from the difference in the degree, the PhD having a much more extensive course work than the MA, but given the level of Wendy's stated disappointment, one could also assume that there were also real differences of self-image.

Articulations of Relational Power with Friends and Mentors

In regards to their involvement with the field of professional and technical communication, all five women stated that they had not been encouraged to develop any kind of academic network in the field, although Winona did network successfully on her own, attending a meeting of a local STC chapter and establishing freelance opportunities through that communication. With the exception of Winona, none of these advanced students held a membership in a professional organization or subscribed to professional journals; in fact, they seemed a bit surprised when asked if they had any such memberships. Winona attended the STC meeting, after being encouraged by her advisor to apply for one of the STC scholarships, which she later was awarded. As to friendships and other social networks, Paula spoke at length about the strength and necessity for friends while

attending law school; in her view, strong friendships were like “a family,” and having that support system was the only way that she could envision anyone completing law school. Despite her having constructed several strong friendships in law school, including some with white women (a fact that she noted on her own), she did not mention any friends in her current program, Professional Writing. Winona mentioned having friends in her bachelor’s degree, but only in regards having an enjoyable social environment. During the interviews, most of the women did not report having a strong academic support system, outside of their teachers and advisors, which by Roberta’s and Wendy’s description seemed very weak. While a few of them mentioned friendships outside of their academic degree program, most of them spoke more of their own accomplishments and achievements in the professional and technical communication program, than about friendships or emotional support in their pursuit of that degree. In other words, networking and support systems, like study groups, collaborative projects, and other informal academic support, that many other students may have, especially those from Caucasian or upper-class backgrounds, were not accessed by these African-American women, or at least not to an extent that they recognized or discussed. In fact, while all the women were students at the same time, often in the same classes, none of them mentioned the others by name. What is seemingly clear, however, was that each of the women spoke more of herself as an individual, than as a member of a group, discussing more about her own accomplishments, decisions, and challenges, than about conversing with friends or studying with a group; these women seemed more willing to articulate and discuss themselves in connection to their choice of degree and career, than in connection with supportive friends or classmates.

Even while the lack of academic networking, formal or informal, may have been disempowering to these students, all them offered more dismaying stories of other challenges in their academic pursuits. Wendy said that she wished that there had been a class on grant and proposal writing, but when she asked for such a class, she was told by the department that they did not have the resources to offer it. She then said, “Not enough student and professor interaction. Too much professor and student distance. I would have liked to do some research with certain professors; however, time would not permit it.” This sentiment was unknowingly echoed by Roberta who expressed real frustration with a lack of helpful feedback and involvement with faculty. Another woman said that she almost lost her tutoring assistantship in an Engineering department when she had to miss several days while her husband was

hospitalized. She reported that her supervisor in that department filed a grievance against her for those missed days, but that the graduate advisor supported her and re-awarded her an assistantship for the next year. In her interview, she described herself as “bewildered” and as feeling somewhat betrayed: “I come from a master's program that was very supportive. . . . they would have sent me a cake or called or something.” Another woman, Felicia, angrily told of being the scapegoat of a racially motivated battle between two faculty members in her previous institution: “I didn't know what was going on, or why Dr. *** seemed to have it out for me, but then my advisor told me that it was really between him and Dr. ***,” and she continued to relay the story about a long-standing racial feud between the two professors.

Some of these stories about the students' lack of support and even their sense of betrayal and sabotage are disheartening. There's no denying that some faculty, no matter the field or discipline, might be racist and sexist, but it is dismaying to realize that such prejudices can significantly impact our students' learning and achievement of success. The challenges these women faced in earning their degrees—a lack of social or academic support, having to choose between family priorities and workplace commitments, and racial discrimination—reveal the extent to which they lacked the power to change the academic situation around them and the extent to which they were unable at times to formulate more beneficial and positive articulations for themselves.

As to the subject matter of a degree in professional and technical communication, three of the women expressed some frustration at not receiving enough instruction in the technological skills they thought were necessary for a career in professional and technical communication, with the harshest criticism coming from Wendy who stated that she was “highly disappointed . . . because I did not learn the technological skills that I wanted to learn.” Because she had previously described her bachelor's degree as having spent two years in computer science, the comment that her master's degree did not supply her with necessary technological skills was surprising. But, this dissatisfaction was also expressed by Felicia and Roberta. These same three women also voiced some frustration at the lack of clarity of the definition for the field of professional and technical communication. “What is it?” asked Felicia, “Is it Professional Writing or is it Technical Communication? You all need to decide what this field really is.” While many of us might or might not agree with her, perhaps this lack of definition somehow hampered her own learning—that had she known more what it was she supposed to have learned, she might have learned

better. This sense that the field of professional and technical communication is amorphous and undefined perhaps led Wendy and Roberta to describe the field in terms of isolation and distance, a field closed to them: “the professors in this field should make a conscious effort to broaden their audience so that more people can know what it’s all about.” Winona, however, expressed a more positive view of the field and of the opportunities afforded to her by virtue of its study:

If you love the writing process and learning new things, the field of Professional Writing can be a wonderful thing. . . . Many African-American women love to write. I think the dearth of African-American women in the field is owed simply to a lack of awareness of the career option.

Conclusion

The study’s findings, albeit small and limited, lead to several suggestions for improved graduate program re-development, suggestions that may be of use to others working to redevelop their graduate programs in professional and technical communication in order to recruit and retain more diverse student populations. Several steps below may be applicable to other programs trying to help their minority students achieve academic success and build a more positive attitude toward the field of professional and technical communication.

- **Encourage membership in academic and professional networks.** As in the case of Winona, being awarded an STC scholarship allowed her to see herself as a member of a much larger group of like-minded individuals, and certainly provided a measure of some financial security.
- **Strengthen academic and career counseling.** In light of Wendy’s stated frustration and disappointment in her college classes, it seems obvious that students should be given adequate and realistic information about possible degree paths, along with realistic acknowledgement about the limits of a college degree.
- **Clarify the learning outcomes and expectations for success in courses and in the field.** All students, not just minority students, should know what they can expect to learn and to know when they have succeeded in meeting those outcomes.
- **Clarify and define the field.** As experienced by Felicia, an unclear and undefined field makes it hard for students to know what they can expect to do in their careers. The lack of a clear-cut definition for

the field is a long-standing dispute in the field. Felicia was not the first scholar to have noted it; however, Felicia's experience should show us that our lack of a clear title may be disadvantageous to some of our students.

- **Help students recognize their own successes by clarifying and acknowledging what they have learned and helping them build on what they know.** Transcripts of Paula, Roberta, and Wendy show that these women did not fully recognize their own achievements or knowledge, and as such, they seemed less able to articulate career paths and options for themselves.
- **Increase “skill application” courses—computer applications, publishing, grant writing, internships.** As Wendy and Roberta's experience shows, students want more courses in which the knowledge learned is directly applicable to work situations.
- **Encourage supportive peer networks.** All students can benefit from supportive peer networks for studying, collaborative projects, career advice, etc. For these minority women, the assumption they held for themselves seems to have been that they should be able to manage the demands of graduate course work on their own and be fully independent. However, especially for Paula, Roberta, and Wendy, their satisfaction and self-esteem might have been better had they been encouraged to forge some peer networks.
- **Improve our own abilities to be beneficial mentors/advisors.** We could offer improved mentoring to our students by encouraging them to seek out and build supportive peer and professional networks, and we could offer workshops and mentoring to other new faculty about the sometime unique challenges faced by minority students.
- **Be aware of students who don't ask for help.** These are often the students, like Wendy and Roberta, who subconsciously feel like they should do it by themselves, to “go it alone” and are thus most likely to suffer needlessly.
- **Produce and encourage scholarship that is pertinent to a broader audience that includes minority members.** As more students and potential minority students see themselves and their experiences represented in published research, they may begin to see the field of professional and technical communication as a broad, diverse, and welcoming field to skilled employees of all ethnicities.

The results of this study suggest that these students, who in the history of professional and academic pursuits have been marginalized and relegated to minority status, may find it difficult to move into positions of professional legitimacy and power, unless academic programs take steps to redevelop programs that more appropriately meet the needs and support sought by minority students. It is vital that our field explore opportunities to increase and enhance the diversity of our academic programs as we become a field more influenced by global business and technical demands. Exploring the positions and perceptions of African-American students in graduate technical writing and communication programs, as this study has attempted in a small way, suggests several directions for further research, and it may help us design programs that contribute to a supportive environment for minority students as well as benefiting students of all backgrounds. Jones, Savage, & Yu (2014) argue that diversifying our classrooms does not simply mean that we welcome newcomers who were previously “underrepresented or excluded”; rather, it means that in seeking “real diversity,” we should challenge our classrooms and our workplaces to change and merge with “previously underrepresented populations” (p. 134). In meeting the needs and of minority students, we will simultaneously strengthen our scholarly, academic fields by broadening and deepening our interests beyond that of the traditional interests of technical writing.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Demographic Questions

What is your age?

How do you describe your ethnic heritage?

What is your current designation in the university?

How many years, counting this one, have you been enrolled in this graduate program?

How many years, counting this one, have you been enrolled at this university?

Academic Background

How many other people from your family, including your parents, attended a college or university?

How many people earned a college degree? What were the degrees?

How were you prepared for higher education? Who, if anybody, helped you prepare for college life?

What difficulties, if any, did you face when you began college? How did you resolve those difficulties? Who, if anybody, helped you?

Retrospectively, what do you wish you had known about attending college before you matriculated? Please explain.

What advice would you give to a young, African-American woman who is thinking about pursuing a college degree? Why?

Professional Writing Program

1. Why did you choose to major in Professional Writing?
2. What difficulties, if any, did you encounter in this program? How did you resolve those difficulties? Who, if anybody, helped you resolve those?
3. Who, if anybody, helped you prepare for a degree and career in Professional Writing?
4. What classes did you find helpful for your degree and for your career goals?
5. What classes do you wish you could have had?

6. Do you currently have a job or career in the field of Professional Writing?
7. What do you hope to achieve with your degree in Professional Writing? What career goals do you have for yourself with this degree? What “life” goals (if any) do you have with this degree?
8. What is your perception of the field of Professional Writing in general?
9. Do you belong to any professional organizations specifically related to Professional Writing?
10. Retrospectively, what do you wish you could change about this Professional Writing program?

Reasons for Success

1. To what or to whom do you attribute your success in this graduate degree program?
 2. What advice would you give to a young, African-American woman who is thinking about pursuing a graduate degree in Professional Writing? Why?
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Author Information

Susan L. Popham is a new transplant to the English department at Indiana University Southeast. Prior to arriving at IUS, she taught, researched, and administered programs at The University of Memphis in the undergraduate and graduate programs in Composition Studies and Professional Writing. While in Memphis, she filled multiple administrative roles for the English department. Now at IUS, she will be teaching in the undergraduate Professional Writing concentration, working as faculty advisor for the publishing and editing classes, and continuing her own research in composition and professional writing, specifically research in discourses of health and medicine. She will also be assuming the duties of editor of *Programmatic Perspectives*, starting with issue 9 in 2017.

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