

Countercurricular Rhetorical Education: Reimagining the University from the Inside Out

Allison Dziuba – University of Alabama

Deposited 09/25/2023

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in
Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies on 28 May 2023, available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2023.2201334>

It is deposited under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation of published version:

Dziuba, A. (2023). Countercurricular rhetorical education: Reimagining the university from the inside out. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 20(2), 174–181.



Countercurricular Rhetorical Education: Reimagining the University from the Inside Out

Allison Dziuba
The University of Alabama
aadziuba@ua.edu

Abstract: This essay articulates the theoretical basis for my term “countercurricular,” which names college students’ use of curricular and extracurricular learning to craft alternative or oppositional views. The countercurricular highlights how student organizers mobilize history to change the present, especially to inscribe into public memory recurring conflicts between students and university administrations. I examine documents related to the Black Student Union at the University of California, Irvine, and discuss teaching this activist history. Through these textual and pedagogical examples, I demonstrate how countercurricular rhetorical education orients our understanding of how students challenge the oppressions upon which the university is built.

Bio: Allison Dziuba is assistant professor of English at the University of Alabama. Her research areas include college student writing and activism, intersectional feminisms, and emotion studies.

Student agitators and university administrations have an ambivalent relationship. Students often hone their critical faculties in their coursework and demonstrate their investment in the campus community by raising concerns about institutional policies, broader social issues, or the imbrication of the two. Universities, as corporate entities, market the impact of the education they offer by citing the intellectual and public pathbreaking of their students and alumni. Students may arrive at activism while within the university environment, and the

university may capitalize on its students' political engagement. But in the moment, when student demands reach administrative ears, agon overtakes reciprocity.

In narrating institutional history, we ought to emphasize these moments of conflict—not folding them into stories of progress, but recognizing the tensions underlying daily life at a university. The “countercurricular” proves crucial in this endeavor. Students’ use of curricular and extracurricular knowledges to craft alternative or oppositional views is what I term countercurricular.¹ The countercurricular highlights how student organizers mobilize history to change the present, especially to inscribe into public memory recurring conflicts between students and administrations as *generative* and *necessary*.

This essay further articulates the countercurricular as it bears on college students’ rhetorical education, or how they write their way into communal and civic life. To illustrate these concepts, I examine documents related to the activism of the Black Student Union (BSU) at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), specifically their 2015 Demands. Significantly, BSU members worked in concert with faculty allies and advocated for curricular changes. I conclude by considering the use of countercurricular texts in the writing classroom. I reflect upon teaching the BSU documents at UCI, only a few years after the 2015 Demands were published.

Multi-sited Rhetorical Education

I am interested in the rhetorical education that emerges from college students’ efforts to create collective identities: they combine coursework, lived experience, and group-sponsored learning to facilitate their participation in (counter)public discourse.² Rhetorical education becomes particularly important, and potentially transformative, for amplifying knowledges that have been historically marginalized within university contexts. To better account for these alternative knowledges, histories of US higher education and of the disciplinary formation of

rhetoric/composition have looked to the extracurriculum—that is, to spaces outside of the writing classroom. Shirley Wilson Logan, for example, asserts the importance of non-school settings for understanding how African Americans gained rhetorical education in the late eighteenth through nineteenth centuries. She asserts that the literacy activities of such individuals, who have been denied access to formal education, are inherently political and that extracurricular education is especially urgent: “Students who have been historically marginalized need to be better prepared to understand and respond to the ways in which language is used to control and deceive as well as to inform and persuade.”³ Anne Ruggles Gere has also argued for the significance of non-academic contexts in communal writing, focusing on groups that gathered around kitchen tables in rural Iowa and in rented rooms in San Francisco’s Tenderloin.⁴

My work focuses on groups that are primarily composed of current students at a postsecondary institution (mostly undergraduates but including graduate students). They are also officially affiliated with that postsecondary institution (e.g., receiving funding, using campus spaces and equipment). These groups, then, are “extracurricular” in that they meet outside formal classroom settings, but they are also materially embedded in the university and invested, to varying degrees, in campus life. That said, I do not mean to imply that such “extracurriculars” simply extend curricular inquiry. Texts and speech transform as they travel across the permeable boundaries of the extra/curricular. For example, Jens Lloyd examines UCI campus newspaper the *New University* as a forum for deliberative discourse: “While cocurricular publications can contain texts that originated in whole or in part as curricular products, the rhetorical significance of these texts shifts as they see publication, reach more readers, serve new purposes, and interact differently with the spaces through which they circulate.”⁵ Lloyd’s observation alludes to the potential public exigence embedded in coursework. In order to harness this potential, scholars

such as Susan Wells argue that teachers “need to build, or take part in building” a public sphere that our students might enter and “that the public sphere is always constructed; . . . it cannot, in our society, be unitary.”⁶ Teachers’ efforts to build a public, beginning in the classroom, alongside students’ efforts to bring public exigence to their classroom learning can work in concert to interrogate how identity and participation are constructed via rhetorical education.

What makes group-sponsored rhetorical education disruptive—even dangerous—is its potential to support activist agendas, underscoring the tensions that may exist between students’ curricular and extracurricular educations. Jonathan Alexander and Susan C. Jarratt consider this valence of rhetorical education in their interviews with several of the so-called Irvine 11: members of the Muslim Student Union at UCI who faced criminal charges for protesting during a guest lecture by the Israeli ambassador to the United States in winter 2010. Alexander and Jarratt find that the students they interviewed drew from various non-academic experiences in developing their protest strategies. Moreover, none of the students regarded their curricular learning as especially relevant to their activism. The authors remark upon the connections students made between their activist efforts and their backgrounds (e.g., as the children of immigrants) and the students’ broadly critical view of the institution of higher education. My research and teaching take up the authors’ challenge: “Future studies of rhetorical education should encompass the curricular and the cocurricular, the formally sponsored and the self-sponsored, as *mutually informing resources* if research in rhetoric and writing studies is to contribute vitally to a collective struggle for cultural understanding and peaceful coexistence.”⁷

This is where the countercurricular comes into play. Per my formulation of the term, the “counter” indexes counterpublic discourses, with which students engage to critique dominant narratives and draw energy from activist legacies. Building upon Jürgen Habermas’s notion of

the public sphere and Nancy Fraser's reworking of it, I consider group communication independent from business or government institutions that prioritizes freedom of assembly, association, and expression as public speech; types of communication that center the discourses of those who have been historically oppressed (e.g., on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, language background, nationality) constitute counterpublic speech. Fraser's formulation, subaltern counterpublics, names the "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."⁸ Both publics and counterpublics, then, are fundamentally shaped by power relations.

It is important to note that power relations shift across temporal and geographical contexts; therefore, counterpublics are not stable entities. While I study college students positioned at the margins of the university, I do not define their counterpublic communication or countercurricular engagement exclusively based on their identities. I take Robert Asen's cue to disentangle marginalized subjects from marginalized discourses: what makes the rhetorical education I study countercurricular is how it critiques the formal learning that subordinates informal ways of knowing. Asen writes, "Focusing not on exclusion per se but on the recognition of exclusion avoids essentialist understandings of difference and situates counter as a constructed relationship."⁹ The countercurricular, then, points to students' work to make the university a place where marginalized discourses can rewrite hegemonic ones. As I will discuss below, students' efforts to change the university from within contest facile "diversity" as an end goal.

UCI Black Student Union Demands, 2015

On January 16, 2015, the Black Student Union (BSU) Demands Team petitioned UCI Chancellor Howard Gillman to commit to substantively improving living and learning conditions

for Black students on campus. The document, posted to change.org and garnering around 1,200 signatures, first establishes its exigence. The BSU authors argue that the university must do more to support Black members of the campus community, and they enumerate incidents of anti-Blackness from the preceding five years. The specific demands, numbered 1–9 and each beginning with, “WE DEMAND,” include the following: a Black student resource center, including Black alumni program coordinators, therapists, academic counselors, and scholarship and job opportunities for Black students; full departmental status, funding, and new faculty hires for the African American Studies Program; a residential assistant position that exclusively serves the African American Studies theme house; a Black scholars residence hall; a university task force dedicated to hiring and retaining Black faculty and staff; an end to administrative references to anti-Blackness on campus as “isolated” or “rare”; and implementation of the demands within three-to-six months. Each item is concrete, detailed, and researched—altogether making a strong statement about both the BSU’s commitment to improving campus life and UCI’s administrative deficiencies that led to these demands. The BSU authors further indicate that change will require not only collective awareness but also collective, intentional response: “The leaders of the Black Student Union are sending out this press release because we want to inform the UC Irvine student body of the steps we are taking to address issues of systemic racism that we as Black students face at the University and what we are doing to promote a more inclusive and better resourced campus for the underserved Black students, staff and faculty. This is also a call for support from the rest of the University in assisting us with this project.”¹⁰

Coverage in the main campus newspaper, the *New University*, over the subsequent months chronicles the administration’s responses from the perspective of student writers. In February 2015, Chancellor Gillman created the Task Force on Ensuring a Positive Climate for

the Campus' African American Community, which included undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff. However, the Task Force was concerned with the general campus climate, not the specific demands listed by the BSU. BSU co-chair Mia Ongundipe-Tillman, quoted in a *New U* article, questions the vagueness of the Task Force's agenda and other administrative work supposedly going on behind the scenes: "Why didn't he [Chancellor Gillman] meet with us first like we demanded? If he's going to do that stuff, why put together a task force that already exists as the climate council? . . . I don't believe that they do work to really help black students."¹¹ By September, UCI administrators announced that several of the demands, including establishing the Black student resource center, strengthening residential support for Black students, and granting African American Studies departmental status, were in progress.

In the years following the 2015 Demands, UCI public relations has attempted to assimilate BSU's activism into triumphant diversity narratives. A February 2022 news item from the UCI School of Humanities lauds the accomplishments of African American Studies and outlines the difficult process through which it ultimately became a department in 2016. The subtitle for the article reads, "A history of activism, a brilliant future," the latter phrase a nod to UCI's Brilliant Future fundraising campaign. The article describes the establishment of the African American Studies program in the 1990s, the BSU's efforts in 2015 to make the program a department, and the department's growth in faculty and undergraduate majors in recent years. The hard work seems to be in the past: "Today, the scholars and scholarship of UCI's Department of African American Studies are used as a source guide for knowledge of Black studies around the world."¹² Conspicuously missing are the voices of former BSU members and their skepticism about the extent of the university's promises. A quotation from Professor Frank

B. Wilderson III, noted Afropessimist and activist, does comment on the centrality of the BSU: “I do not think that we would be a department if civil disobedience on the part of Black students was not part of the equation.”¹³ Wilderson appears here and in the BSU’s history as a co-conspirator, providing some of the academic support for the students’ countercurricular efforts. In 2015, the BSU authors demanded that Wilderson be put in charge of overhauling the multiculturalism general education requirement.

An April 2022 interview with BSU co-chairs Briana Jallow and Arletha Saint-Jean provides a counternarrative to the UCI release. Zoë Howes, self-identified Black first-year student at UCI, records her conversation with the co-chairs in a piece for online magazine *Her Campus*. Howes asks about the longer history of anti-Blackness on UCI’s campus, to which Saint-Jean replies, “. . . when we are talking about these anti-black incidents, it’s not like it’s a one time thing or this just happened this year or last year. These are incidents that have been happening for almost a decade. We’ve talked to past UCI Alumni and the problems that we’re going through as BSU and as Black students, have been going on when they were admits at UCI. We’re talking about 2011, 2008, and 2005.” Jallow adds, “1984!”¹⁴ Howes asks what current UCI students can do to address anti-Blackness; her interlocutors urge readers, Black and non-Black, to proactively educate themselves by, for instance, taking an African American studies class. Saint-Jean and Jallow underscore how their efforts on behalf of BSU, ostensibly a campus-based extracurricular organization, connect them with generations of student activism that official university accounts do not adequately reflect. At the same time, they urge further student engagement with the curricular resources UCI offers. These stances and their dissemination through a student-authored article encapsulate, like the 2015 BSU Demands, countercurricular rhetorical education.

In briefly recounting here the contexts for UCI students' counterpublic writing, I want to direct our attention to how students rewrite public memory as a way of holding the university administration accountable. My analyses do not merely point to a cynical reading of institutions' co-opting dissent. As BSU members and their faculty mentors demonstrate, how students leverage institutional critiques, drawn from curricular settings, to effect institutional change is a process more complex than either a smooth diversity narrative or a student-versus-university binary can explain.

Teaching (with) the Countercurricular

In my writing classes at UCI and beyond, I have assigned texts, such as the *Her Campus* piece, that evidence students' countercurricular rhetorical education. I teach student writing that is rooted in the campus community. My aim has been to connect my students to their past and present counterparts who are creating spaces for their communal and civic engagement, spaces that often contest the discursive parameters of the campus. By learning about and teaching university history, I hope to make my own intervention in public memory. However, I continue to grapple with teaching these texts and histories while not co-opting or academically abstracting their radical origins. I aim to avoid what a former member of the Muslim Student Union and student activist called "forced" political engagement:¹⁵ inventing rhetorical exigences for our class assignments that do not bear on the actual concerns or lived experiences of our students.

Nancy Welch warns against teaching activist rhetorics as one-size-fits-all or labeling discourses such as those emerging from the countercurricular as codified rhetorical forms. Instead, she offers "rhetorical discernment," which posits that there is not a universal formula for effective public speech or protest: "A tactic that reads and works well in one set of circumstances may not work in another. . . . Better, I think, is to understand activism as a messy rhetorical art. .

. . the particular issue, the particular place, the particular differentials of power at play, all requiring complicated acts of judgment and the risk of mistake.”¹⁶ We cannot manufacture authentic activist engagement in our classrooms, but we can study relevant models of how to deploy messy rhetorical arts. Incorporating examples of countercurricular communication into our curricula signals to students that their outside commitments are legitimate, and valued, sources of knowledge. What’s more, we can encourage students’ investigation into what kinds of countercurricular efforts have shaped their current university experiences.

When I have assigned the 2015 Demands, it has been to help ground the class in local context. Students enrolled in my Summer Bridge writing lab course in 2018 and 2019 were new, UCI first-year undergraduates, who received a scholarship to earn their first course credits and gain familiarity with college life before the fall quarter began. According to the Summer Bridge program’s eligibility requirements, students need to be either low income or “from disadvantaged backgrounds/circumstances” as well as California residents.¹⁷ We read the Demands as an example of campus history—student activism and activist writing that aimed to change the university. We also read selections from the *New U* and analyzed the varying coverage.

Most of the students who read the Demands were not surprised by the racism that proliferates at the university, but the specific and recent incidents listed in the 2015 Demands banished any notion of college as a utopia. My Summer Bridge students were predominantly Asian American and Latinx, two groups that made up 33 percent and 23 percent, respectively, of the UCI student body in fall 2018. In comparison, Black students accounted for just 2 percent.¹⁸ The 2015 Demands increased my students’ awareness of the discrimination that Black students, faculty, and staff continue to face, even at a university that touts its contributions to “The

American Dream.”¹⁹ The Demands further demonstrated the tangible impact of student organizing and writing.

Bringing the countercurricular back to the curricular recenters my pedagogy, which is committed to equipping students with the tools needed to dismantle structural oppression, on what campus changes students have actually advocated for and the rhetorical strategies they have harnessed. By teaching the 2015 Demands, I aimed to show that the writing classroom offers students an opportunity to analyze and try out modes of public-facing rhetoric before they take these models out into the worlds they are imagining, creating, and recreating. As teacher-scholars, we can guide students to the relevant textual models that may inspire them; given our institutional status of (relative) authority and resources, we can help them connect with and learn from their predecessors, both in person and in the archive. One of the discussion questions I posed to my Summer Bridge students was, “How do the writers of the BSU Demands connect historical and present-day oppressions?” Not only remembering the BSU’s efforts to change the university, but also emphasizing student writers’ rhetorical positioning within a longer history of conflict helps us to intervene in institutional narratives that characterize student activism as “isolated” or “rare”—or as unnecessary. Countercurricular texts, then, urge us to reflect on our positionalities as members of the campus community and our roles in crafting campus memory.

¹ I have discussed this phenomenon, albeit before naming it “countercurricular,” in “‘We Want to Be Intersectional’: Asian American College Students’ Extracurricular Rhetorical Education,” *Peitho: Journal of the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition*, 23, no. 4 (2021).

² My definition is informed by Jessica Enoch’s: “any educational program that *develops* in students a communal and civic identity and *articulates* for them the rhetorical strategies, language practices, and bodily and social behaviors that make possible their participation in communal and civic affairs.” *Refiguring Rhetorical Education: Women Teaching African*

American, Native American, and Chicano/a Students, 1865–1911 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 7–8, Enoch’s emphasis.

³ Shirley Wilson Logan, *Liberating Language: Sites of Rhetorical Education in Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 9.

⁴ Anne Ruggles Gere, “Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition,” *College Composition and Communication* 45, no. 1 (1994): 75–92.

⁵ Jens Lloyd, “College Writing and Campus Values: The Nixon Library Debate at UC Irvine,” *Literacy in Composition Studies* 6, no. 1 (2018): 5.

⁶ Susan Wells, “Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?” *College Composition and Communication* 47, no. 3 (1996): 326.

⁷ Jonathan Alexander and Susan C. Jarratt, “Rhetorical Education and Student Activism,” *College English* 76, no. 6 (2014): 542, my emphasis.

⁸ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 67.

⁹ Robert Asen, “Seeking the ‘Counter’ in Counterpublics,” *Communication Theory* 10, no. 4 (2000): 427.

¹⁰ Cheryl Flores, “Implement Institutional Resources for Black Students,” *change.org*, <https://www.change.org/p/howard-gillman-implement-institutional-resources-for-black-students>

¹¹ Phuc Pham, “Gillman Forces Task Force to Improve Campus Experience for Black Community,” *New University*, 3 Feb. 2015, <https://newuniversity.org/2015/02/03/gillman-forces-task-force-to-improve-campus-experience-for-black-community/>

¹² Lilibeth Garcia, “The past, present and future of UCI’s Department of African American Studies,” UCI School of Humanities, 17 Feb. 2022, <https://www.humanities.uci.edu/news/past-present-and-future-ucis-department-african-american-studies>

¹³ Garcia, “The past, present and future.”

¹⁴ Zoë Howes, “UC Irvine, Let’s Do Better: A Discussion with UCI’s Black Student Union,” *Hercampus*, 19 Apr. 2022, <https://www.hercampus.com/school/uc-irvine/uc-irvine-lets-do-better-a-discussion-with-ucis-black-student-union/>

¹⁵ Alexander and Jarratt, “Rhetorical Education,” 538.

¹⁶ Nancy Welch, “Afterword: Science, Politics, and the Messy Arts of Rhetoric,” in *Unruly Rhetorics: Protest, Persuasion, and Publics*, eds. Jonathan Alexander et al. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018), 305.

¹⁷ UCI Summer Bridge, “Scholarship Eligibility,” *University of California, Irvine*, <https://summerbridge.due.uci.edu/application/eligibility/>

¹⁸ Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), National Center for Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>

¹⁹ “American Dream,” *University of California, Irvine*, <https://uci.edu/american-dream/>