Because We Already Are Legitimate: Feminist Coalition Building among Graduate and Undergraduate Students to Counter Patriarchal, White, Heteronormative 'Expertise'

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Abstract: This article details a coalition building practice between undergraduate and graduate student researchers that embraces student hood as a position of liminality. Using Black intersectional feminist theory and alternative models of mentorship and writing collaboration, the authors argue that legitimacy exists as a construct or a barrier of academia that serves to keep diverse student voices on the sidelines and reify the white heteronormative patriarchy. In detailing their coalition building practices, they describe their methodology of iterative member checking to center historically silenced experiences in academia and reimagine the role of students in research.

Our research team was formed in the Winter of 2022 as a continuing research initiative that was developed to incorporate student voice in assessment research. As our primary task, we worked under university assessment specialists to craft a research agenda where we developed student-centered inquiries around assessment and learning, trained our undergraduate partners in data collection and analysis, and reported our findings across academic spaces. We started as a traditional, top-down hierarchical research team, where expertise and power came with title and

authority. Our team, composed of two Writing Studies graduate students and two interdisciplinary undergraduate student-researchers, worked to meet our primary funding purpose, but soon began to understand our group differently as we explored the complexities of relationship-building and activist work in academia through our unique methodology of participant-centered research and peer-to-peer mentoring in our writing. The call for our research became more personal, the stakes of the group became more important, and our team fortified to support what we felt was our new central mission: fighting the perception of who was deemed appropriate and legitimate in academic research. Here, our coalition formed.

Over the last three years, across two separate research inquiries, we have worked to build a horizontal mentorship model that intentionally challenges the traditional academic default of who is worthy and capable. In other words, we actively decenter heteronormativity, whiteness, and patriarchal practices through our research and writing, emphasizing our diverse perspectives as a group who negotiates a multitude of identities, along with our precarious roles as both undergraduate and graduate students. While each team member exists in a more perilous position in the university than the last, we have rejected the traditional power structures often handed down in research teams, embracing our liminality as both a means of adding much-needed perspective in empirical research and highlighting the obscured power of living on the edges of academia. Individually, we have each felt conditionally accepted to the university and academic world and were unable to see our liminal positions as places of possibility; however, through our coalition building we could act as a dynamic unit of perspective and expertise. Together, we were already legitimate.

In our effort to look past legitimacy as a construct of academia and gatekeeping barrier, we join others (e.g., Morris, Rule, and LaVecchia) in challenging the notion of "conditionally accepted" (Grollman) members of academia through coalition building. As a concept, conditional acceptance captures the experience of being pushed to the margins of higher education largely due to the perceived status associated with personal identity. In practice, our team is determined to disrupt the patriarchal heteronormative domination of research, writing, and legitimacy by drawing on non-hierarchical forms of mentorship (VanHaitsma and Ceraso) to build coalition in hostile academic environments, research from non-traditional viewpoints, and write in ways that value and honor our varying positionalities. Specifically, we draw on coalition building as a necessary feminist and intersectional practice to form a group that demands that we do not need to erase pieces of identity to add valuable, thoughtful work to academia.

In the following, we detail our experiences as liminal players in academia, graduate students and undergraduates, with a vast array of historically othered identities, to describe how we work against academic gatekeeping in both the institutional and national context. We argue that through building coalitions across our distinctive identities, each facet of our personhood is undeniably found in how we frame the contexts of our research and our writing. Our research focuses on how marginalized groups on-campus are impacted by inequitable curricular design; because

of this, our coalition building is essential to carve out space in often-gate kept sectors of academia and ensure that we highlight traditionally silenced voices. In other words, our coalition building allows us to reject the need to "legitimize" ourselves in the eyes of academia, embrace our positionality, and fortify against gatekeeping forces to add new voices to writing practices and research.

Building Coalition, Finding Power in Liminality

In building our coalition, we often ask ourselves: how can we ensure that our personal histories intersect with one another in a way that is mutually responsive as we come together in addressing these inequities, especially while we exist on the edges of legitimacy in our positions? To this end, we forward the work of Black Feminist scholars on intersectionality and horizontal mentoring throughout our conscious effort in developing the foundational model of our coalition building. Building from Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, Patricia Hill Collins extends the conversation via her examination of the "matrix of oppression" and how we can transcend barriers of domination that impede coalition-building (18). Therefore, we believe that coalition is centered around building bridges and forming connections, despite differences, in order to act in a way that acknowledges the convergence of race, gender, and class on personhood (Glenn and Lunsford; Crenshaw; Collins); we also extend coalition to include bridge building across positionality, coupling the concept of coalition with the need for horizontal mentoring as forwarded by Pamela VanHaitsma and Steph Ceraso. While VanHaitsma and Ceraso speak from positions of academia as tenure-track faculty, their insistence on including the perspectives and voices of those in the process of "making it" is central to our coalition. Our team, certainly, is in the very midst of that process. Loren enters their senior year as an undergraduate; Mik has graduated and is beginning to apply to graduate school; Mikenna is working on their qualifying exams; Jennifer is finishing their dissertation. In this sense, our team extends beyond our academic responsibilities and gives significant weight to how our individual backgrounds impact our academic identities while we continue to refine our practice of building an intersectional coalition.

We begin with trust in shared ideology. Loren and Mik were chosen by former undergraduate members of the research team due to their mutual desire to amplify underrepresented voices in higher education assessment research. This shared desire was crucial to the initial stages of our relationship-building as our coalition had not yet fully formed. As with other types of budding relationships, it was necessary that our partnership was founded on mutual ideology. VanHaitsma and Ceraso underscore how "talking with someone who shares our experiences may offer crucial space for validation and support" (VanHaitsma and Ceraso 216). We met virtually on a weekly basis as our main source of communication. At first, Loren and Mik were hesitant to take space in meetings and found it difficult to overcome traditional feelings of hierarchical workplace relationships due to their positionality as undergraduates. Over time, our research team's interpersonal dynamic quickly evolved into an organic structure that favored non-hierarchical membership and operated largely on trust and compassion, largely due to our personal commitments to the topic.

Because we were able to relate to the research impetus through our individual experiences with marginalization and liminality, we were able to carve an open space for our whole selves in the research endeavor.

In these meetings, we made intentional space to reflect on our experiences as first-generation students or people of color in the classroom, speaking to our lived experience and how these moments might influence and impact our research. Kathryn M. Lambrecht describes the necessity of sharing burdens in student hood wherein "the more students know about other students having similar struggles, the more likely they are to feel a sense of solidarity with their peers" (Lambrecht 147). We found this to be fundamental to our cohort's non-hierarchical development. As our collaborative relationship deepened, we were more open to sharing our uncertainties and fears as marginal members in academia deriving from various experiences in our lives. This cemented our trust as we learned to maneuver through vulnerability during our conversations about ourselves and, later, with our participants. We were able to bring this vulnerability to our interviews and focus groups, providing other undergraduates with an open place to describe what it meant to be non-white or first generation or low income in the walls of a highly selective higher education institution. In each of these conversations, we also make a conscious effort to discuss non-academic happenings in our lives. Our work, although important, is only a fragment of our lives.

We then center our personal and collective missions through our research agenda and methods. As scholars of color, Mik and Loren operate within an academic space that falls within Carmen Kynard's definition of a "damn-near-all-white institution" (188). It is through the lack of the institution's proximity to authentic anti-racist BIPOC scholarship that feelings of 'othering' manifests. How can we expect BIPOC scholarship to excel in spaces that have shown performative effort to actively enlist their perspectives? As assessment researchers, we follow scholars like Asao Inoue who argue that assessment is inextricably linked to the hegemonic "racial *habitus*" wherein students of color are held to a standardized metric of whiteness throughout their education. Assessment has disproportionately disadvantaged students that do not fit the status quo: students of color, first-generation, low income, queer-identifying, etc.– all of which are overlapping identities of our team members. Rachel Daugherty suggests that telling one's story can construct the maintenance of intersectional feminist scholarship through the deliberate cultivation of safe spaces for diverse perspectives. Therefore, we elect to prioritize the historically othered students' perspectives in our research methodology. It is through our conversational-style dialogue with undergraduates with similar backgrounds that we gain significant insight into which assessment practices are widely viewed as disproportionately unjust by eliciting much more nuanced and genuine responses. Notably, we found that participants were usually eager to share negative academic experiences signifying the unspoken camaraderie between their shared positionality as students. This was observed via participant responses that are typical of casual exchanges between friends, using both slang and expletives to emphasize their frustration with the university's assessment practices. For example, a participant described their interactions with faculty as "shady" to evoke the depth of

untrustworthiness between themselves and the predominantly white faculty. Another participant described a professor's intimidating behavior as "gaslighting the hell out of [them]" when they requested greater support on course content.

To further express solidarity with participants, we offer our coalition's main practice of cultivating space for marginalized students by sharing personal anecdotes with our participants derived from our own academic journeys; a practice we describe as iterative-member checking (Burke Reifman, White, and Kalish), which reflects elements of critical race theory's practice of counterstory (e.g., Martinez; Yosso). Our livelihoods are not monolithic by any means, but we often encounter cultural and racial similarities that contextualize our understanding of their experiences. For instance, Mik would detail their insecurities as a transfer student who had felt out-of-place in comparison to their peers who attended the university directly from high school. Mik's story encouraged one participant to describe their mutual insecurity as an older transfer student who did not "want to seem stupid" as all their peers seemingly understood the material with ease. The two then talked about overcoming their anxieties of asking for academic support, exchanging resources and advice that abated their transition from community college. Thus, iterative member-checking encourages intuitive connections with our participants because we are able to deconstruct their responses with critical nuance that may not be reflected by researchers who do not share the same lived experiences. To a greater extent, we want to ensure that we foster an academic environment that offers marginalized groups the ability to voice their concerns without fear of 'being othered,' largely because we have lived in this fear.

We continue to build coalitions through our temporal positions. While "student" is often code for "inexperienced" or "uninitiated," we also acknowledge the power in the liminal nature of this label. All of us, as we progress in our studies, will inevitably abandon the student label and the institution in which we exist as students. We recognize this temporal status as one that can offer us more promise for coalition building that extends past institutional borders. Namely, we know that pushing against these institutional boundaries may burn local capital; further, we know that this local capital *can* be burnt because it will not travel. In no way do we see our temporality as an excuse for indignance, but rather, we seek to reclaim liminality as a space for experimentation and for pushing against well-established mechanisms of subjugation built and maintained by the institutions we currently reside in. In this vein, we call on scholars like Lambrecht who have advocated for viewing liminality and emerging "expertise not as a deficit but as a potential source of agency" (134). Our research is then an act of resistance that lives outside the walls of a singular institution and the larger power hierarchies prescribed by higher education.

Coalition Enacted through Collaborative Writing

Our trust, shared mission, and devotion to empowering ourselves are reified and manifested in how we approach our writing tasks. Ashanka Kumari, Sweta Baniya, and Kyle Larson

posit that "[t]raditional academic genres alone are insufficient in building praxis necessary for responding to institutionalized inequities." We agree, and further contend that traditional, top-down co-authoring processes are insufficient in addressing institutional inequities. As writing tasks make up a huge portion of our responsibilities as a research coalition, we have developed a strategic research methodology that works to honor all our voices (Burke Reifman, White, and Kalish) that has resulted in empirical articles that allow student voices to be centered in research (Burke Reifman, Sims, Penarroyo, and Torres). Specifically, our co-authorship model relies on the framework of collaborative, horizontal mentorship. Critical work on mentorship notes how, despite its many benefits, mentorship "too often becomes deprioritized, professionalized, and reinscribes power hierarchies" (Singh and Mathews 1703). In enacting our coalition, we actively work against reproducing such mentoring hierarchies by leaning into one another's strengths as varying writers positioned across a wide spectrum of abilities. In this sense, we consider ourselves flexible learners offering guidance to one another, while simultaneously receiving it.

When we first came together, our discussion was largely pragmatic. We provided basic introductions to one another during which we discovered a significant overlap between our academic positionalities — Jennifer and Mikenna hailing from the same program, and Mik and Loren pursuing an undergraduate degree within the same discipline. Jennifer, who has led previous cohorts, then provided a brief overview of our team's ongoing research projects to get Mikenna, Mik, and Loren up to date. New to the practice of research, Mik and Loren were hesitant to participate, offering tidbits of feedback here and there. As undergraduates, Mik and Loren were initially less confident in their capacity to contribute meaningful work because of their perceived "lower status" on the academic ladder. As scholars of color, they must contend with preconceived notions of being seen as illegitimate in comparison to their white peers and the status quo (Pittman; Buchanan and Dotson). The effects of structural racism commonly manifest in impostor syndrome or feelings of incompetence, despite excelling academically otherwise (Peteet et al.).

The meetings were initially quiet and even rote– we moved through the motions. Over shared time and through vulnerable conversations where we developed trust and fortified our shared mission of our research, we began to evolve. To collectively reject the notion of impostor syndrome and recognize it as a product of structural racism and misogyny, we slowly, yet consciously eliminated the prospects of ascribed expertise. Meeting by meeting, the agenda became a group endeavor, the writing projects were broken up equally, and the direction of the team was a group decision. This development became most apparent in our writing, where we were able to clearly abdicate a traditional hierarchical structure, and as a group, we lean into a reflexive manner of reviewing one another's writing.

Today, Mik and Loren take on a much more active role as researchers, taking the lead on multiple publications and proposals. They will bring calls for conferences and writing projects to the group with plans and purpose in mind, they help to adapt methodologies and research pursuits

using their experience as students, and they use writing as a vehicle for their voices. With substantial experience and guidance, they also feel fully equipped to offer insight to contemporary attitudes, language, and behaviors of undergraduate student participants; critical nuance that we deem necessary to better serve the community we research and represent.

As our coalition's practices solidified and our criticality came to the forefront, our team found that existing in an academic space that seeks to address inequities in higher academia inevitably creates discomfort. Our discomfort exists within the confines of disclosure due to its exploitative nature (see Donegan for a description of how disclosure is compounded by liminality). Rusty Bartels emphasizes the duality of how "the 'unknowable' that disclosure seeks to make 'known' can also be a point of danger, a necessity, and a price to pay" (Bartels). We harbor identities that higher academia often draws on to incorporate marginalized identities into their institution without offering material support to sustain their livelihoods. To circumvent this, our team has found comfort in the inclusive "we" pronoun throughout our writing practice. "We" allows us to exist as a singular, but united entity without disclosing any intimate details about our respective selves that can be used to exploit us. At the same time, we acknowledge how disclosure can be a liberating and meaningful experience. In this collection, we have chosen to disclose the composition of identities that the team represents. It is through our writing practices that our coalition can manifest in a tangible form.

The Barrier: "Diversity"

The use of the inclusive pronoun marks our existence in hostile waters. For those arriving with identities outside the white, cishet, middle class norm, we often find a sense of *conditional acceptance*, a term defined by Eric Anthony Grollman. As Grollman contends, conditional acceptance impacts those with historically ancillary identities and speaks to "the feeling of being accepted in the academy on the condition that one does little to challenge the academic status quo." As a team, we hold a myriad of intersecting identities that compound in marginalization and conditional acceptance. We represent proud first-generation identities, working together to counter the othering feelings of "figuring out" school and the pressure from our families to do something *great* in academia, despite the othering of our low-income, blue-collar upbringings. We represent a multitude of queer identities, from genderqueer to non-hetero sexualities that feel easy to hide and obscure in the academic world. Parts of our group identify as people of color, calling on the inherent power of their families' immigration stories and cultural identities to persist in historically white spaces. Conversely, part of our team exists as white women, who must acknowledge, confront, and challenge this inherent privilege throughout our work. Our abdication of power authority seeks to decenter our whiteness, knowing that we cannot make claims for social, racial justice without the implicit reproduction of social injustice through unchecked centering of whiteness. Our coalition also honors the myriad powers of womanhood in establishing our political solidarity, drawing from bell hooks' framework of feminist activism wherein we are compelled

by the "need to do more research and writing about the barriers that separate us and the ways we can overcome such separation" as we center our research on the experiences of underrepresented groups (56). Finally, we all come from the liminal space of studenthood; while in various stages, graduate, undergraduate, transitioning to graduate school, our diverse social identities are further amplified by our student statuses.

Intersectional feminist scholarship has long recounted the multitude of ways that "socially constructed categories of identity" (Harold, Prock, and Groden, 2) intersect and change depending on the environment you find yourself in. In this sense, we join others in finding that academic identity and status act as an extension of oneself. These statuses then carry certain presumptions due to the way status can become synonymous with an individual's externally perceived value. In this, our marginalized social identities are further compounded by the precarity of student status (see Banville, Das, Davis, Durazzi, Dsouza, Gresbinnk, Kalodner-Martin, and Stambler for more on this experience). In our experience, the word "student" is meticulously adorned onto our titles to preface "academic researcher" for the sole purpose of differentiating our team from more "legitimate" forms of work created by non-student researchers. Our institution can then satiate its desire to claim innovative diversity and promote itself as a hub for marginal perspectives while offering minimal contributions to the actual labor *we* undertake on its behalf. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, institutions often allocate resources and therefore the responsibility of diversity initiatives on individuals, despite the drain on the individual and the inherent creation of hierarchy in this approach (253).

As a result of these many liminal identities, our research team's perceived value radically shifts depending on the academic environment we operate in and the goals of that environment. In this, the institution has held us up as *diversity* incarnate and touts our work as instrumental to equity in one space and then, delegitimizes our work as "student" driven and "special interest" in the next. Like others, we have experienced the celebration of our diversity as a group as ornamental. Sarah Dwyer helps us understand the "for-show" diversity in the utilization of "nondiscrimination statements, diversity policies, and Safe Space stickers" to frame "diverse bodies as objects for institutions to acquire and display" (33). We are the safe space stickers, touted at meetings and in emails as a "diverse group of student researchers."

In this way, we are everything the academy wants on paper. We represent many of the identities that higher education has traditionally and systematically pushed aside yet seek to highlight in diversity initiatives; we work hard, and sometimes for free; we bring our otherness to the research moment as assets, countering years of educational trauma around these identities; and we show up for the institution, articulate in the ways they demand and ever willing to prove our "worth". We are the "diversity champions" that the institution has called on (Ahmed 253). Yet, we live on the margins of acceptance for our actual work, fighting for minimum wage pay, begging for audiences with those who decide our funding, and having our work obscured as *just* a "diversity

initiative." In other words, while we publish, research, present, secure grants, and move through all the appropriate academic gateways for legitimacy, we are almost always reduced to our diverse identities, which are couched in student hood, rather than the products of our efforts. Martinez, in her counterstory, also describes how "'diversity" takes on the form of hospitality," where diverse identities are accommodated, but never truly taken in the fold (224). Thus, we can understand our position as a diverse research team in two different ways: (1) as a corporate signifier of institutional diversity, or (2) as a disruptive coalition that actively creates space for historically underrepresented groups in academia.

As a research team largely concerned with contextualizing undergraduate perspectives on their assessment, we understand the significance of how our personal ideologies inform our work. Our equity-centered research team, as self-described in previous publications (Redacted for Review), must be careful to maintain a particular academic environment in lieu of establishing problematic dichotomies that serve a traditionalist oppressive hierarchy. We understand operating within higher academia as navigating through a historically rigid nexus of settler colonialism (Patel). Through this, we continue to act as both institutional signifiers and disruptors in our work. We hold the qualifying titles they have given us, yet we do the work we want to.

Nonetheless, academia continues to make calls for diversity and facilitate conversations on inclusion and equity without doing the work to remove conditional acceptance. In other words, diversity policies and initiatives act as a thin bandage over deeply rooted structural inequities that value white, heterosexual, cisgendered, middle-class bodies more than others. While we feel the effects of these competing values throughout our work, we band together to build a coalition and privilege our personal mission, to the best we can, over the institution's desired view of us as "diversity champions."

The Double-Edged Sword, Free Labor, and Agency

The coalition we have worked to build through our horizontal approach to mentorship remains dedicated to our work of removing the default heteronormative, white, patriarchal lens to research and writing; instead of accepting this norm, we work as a group to incorporate an array of perspectives and academic experiences in empirical research. However, despite our best efforts and many successes, our research coalition will no longer be funded by our institution in the following academic year. We are immensely saddened by their decision to terminate the funding of our program, even more by the unwillingness of well-meaning individuals who could not articulate our value to administrators. In fact, we were referenced as an "independent program," a phrase that carries the implication that our actions did not align with our organization's expectations.

Kelsie Walker, Morgan Gross, Paula Weinman, Hayat Bedaiwi, and Alyssa McGrath rightfully remind us that speaking about the conditions of student hood is dangerous and that our

"bodies bear the high cost of complacency" in these systems of unjustness (108). We speak about these conditions here, knowing the possible consequences, and we bear the weariness of the experience in our bodies. Be that as it may, we wholeheartedly stand by our decision to deviate from conventional expectations of operation. Within the short span of a year, our team's outright rejection of their proposed standardized schema has demonstrated the material and psychological benefits of training undergraduates as researchers and academic writers in their own right. Our collaborative model sanctioned vulnerability as we learned to reconcile our varied positionalities in conscious coalition-building efforts through co-authorship. Through our collective efforts, we found that the active creation of community is crucial to the success and well-being of not only our identities as students, but to our overall personhood as marginalized actors. For this reason, we plan to continue our assessment research regardless of funding with the intention of expanding our purview to larger participant pools and audiences.

Unfortunately, the continuation of this work outside of institutional funding does necessitate the act of free labor, which presents its own challenges. Like others, we contend all academic labor must be paid due to its remarkable contribution to cultural work and its implications for future working conditions within universities (Allmer; Tennant). Unpaid labor also carries greater risk; it does not guarantee us any immediate tangible benefit compounded by the basic fact that we must function under a capitalist system. After all, we must provide for our respective households and must also be wary of the burden of time and energy we shoulder to commit to this research. Alexis Pauline Gumbs thoughtfully reminds us that "The university is not about the preservation of a bright brown body. The university will use me alive and use me dead." To continue this labor, we must acknowledge the certainty in which the university will take any given opportunity to co-opt our labor as another *shiny* diverse commodity, while offering no material means to support our livelihoods.

However, as each of us transitions outside of our current institution, we feel secure in our capacity to supplement the conceptual framework and methodologies we find valuable. It is an inherent amalgamation of marginalized experiences that deserve to be amplified and given the same respect as White bodies in higher academia. For us, our act of free labor is an act of resilience, creating impact and space for future generations of marginalized researchers. We hope our work will challenge who can speak on research and complicate the purposes of that research. In this sense, we have the power to disrupt performative measures of university-forward diversity initiatives and, instead, facilitate meaningful relationships with underserved communities through our work, leveraging liminality as a productive tool. After all, higher education tells us they want diversity, and they want to hear the voices of historically disenfranchised groups—so we write together to deliver that, and we operate on the understanding and steadfast belief that our words and experiences deserve and need to be shared. Most of all, we assert that we are, in fact, legitimate.

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