

DOCUMENTATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION: ASSESSING THE  
RHETORICAL E(RACE)URE OF BIRACIAL IDENTITY

by

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## **DEDICATION**

To my family, whose love and complexity have made this project mean so much more.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Until the age of ten, my family and I lived in the diversely rich Aldine suburb in northwest Houston. Our Forestwood neighborhood was securely middle-class, populated by mostly Vietnamese-American, African-American, and Mexican-American families. My family's street closely embodied the melting pot sensibility America is so known for: our immediate neighbors alone claimed roots in Mexico, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, while our street's cul-de-sac housed an extended Vietnamese family clan. And when my family decided to move further out of the city limits to yet another suburb, we sold our house to an African-American family. It was in this microcosmic amalgam that my understanding of similarity and difference emerged.

As someone who is racially mixed—my father is White and my mother is Mexican-American<sup>1</sup>—I found it difficult to navigate these sometimes perplexing racial waters. Besides my father, the only other Anglo on our street—and in my neighborhood and school, I often felt—was my close friend Jennifer's mother. Like me, Jennifer was a mixed White/Latinx female. However, the difference was that her father was Mexican, which meant that her last name, Mares, seemed more ethnically rooted and interesting than mine—at least phonetically so. What's more, because my father is White and my mother refused to teach me Spanish, claiming my Mexican heritage felt unjustified, as if I were an imposter in my own skin; even today, I am still not fluent in Spanish. As a result,

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that while I speak about my racial heritage as a bifurcated identity—one split between two cultures—I understand and recognize the fact that these racial categories represent many ethnic and cultural identities. Within the White racial category exists many ethnic cultural identities tied to European and Middle Eastern descent, among others. Likewise, Mexican-American identity is comprised of European and indigenous ancestry, and thus, most Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are mestizo. However, in larger American society, these distinctions often go unacknowledged. Because race bases itself on more generalized characteristics of identity, I approach the concept of race from this perspective as a way to remain consistent with social practice.

I went through bouts of self-doubt, at times, owning my biracial heritage, and at others resenting and rejecting my Whiteness for what I conceived was a more authentic, Mexican self. Over time, these quandaries and questions manifested themselves in other personal relationships I developed with romantic partners and friends.

It seems now that my first boyfriend was a pinnacle figure in the development of my racial identity. By society's standards, Marty is unmistakably White: blonde hair, blue eyes, fair skin, southern accent, German surname. To his family, neighbors, and friends, I was his complete opposite: dark brown hair, brown eyes, lightly tanned skin, measured accent, Scotch-Irish surname—a name which was understood by few, and confused many upon meeting me.

I wish I could say that Marty was sensitive and understanding of my mixed background, but that would be false. It is not that he was not respectful of my heritage; he simply did not respect anyone's that diverged from his own, an unfortunate fact that I came to discover as our relationship progressed. Just as I myself at times tried to negate my Whiteness in service of a more authentic Mexican self, Marty went to great lengths to suppress my Mexicanness through ridicule, slurs, and even complete erasure, at times calling me a wetback, while at others using my father's Whiteness as evidence of my inherent and *ultimate* Whiteness.

I could assign complete blame to Marty, but that would be unfair. Instead, I believe his racist outlook and tendencies evolved from his friends and family, particularly his father, who frequently spewed racial slurs in normal conversation. This did and does not completely absolve him of his behavior, but it does provide answers all these years later for his ignorance, and has allowed me to empathize with him, even at his worst.

Still, because I wanted to be liked and accepted by Marty and his family, I let these slurs roll off my back, preferring to remain silent, while at times acknowledging them as truth—much to my shame then and now. Eventually, I ended our relationship, and it was only then that I felt cleansed of the ethical and moral injunctions I had endured. Although my next relationship was by and large healthier and more inclusive, I found myself dealing with different questions and desires surrounding race.

I met Edward in a Mexican-American Literature course as an undergraduate at the University of Houston. Edward is Mexican-American with tanned, brown skin, brown eyes, jet-black hair, and a last name that I envied: Garza. In class together, I was impressed by his knowledge of Mexican-American mythos. He exhibited a sense of cultural familiarity and pride I yearned for, and when we began dating, I strove for the same, especially after meeting his family.

Unlike mine, which hails from Upstate New York, Connecticut, and the Rio Grande Valley, most of Edward's family lives in Houston. As a result, frequent family gatherings and celebrations were part and parcel of the Garza clan ritual. Edward's family also speaks a language and practices a religion that have been long-repressed by my own. While we dated, I was immersed in lovely Spanish melodies and Catholic iconography; his maternal grandparents maintained a shrine to the Virgin Mary year-round very few could match. What's more, Edward frequently visited extended family in North-Central Mexico—an annual trip I was fortunate enough to accompany him on once toward the end of our relationship. Again, I felt myself torn: on the whole, I was happy to visit a place which my own family migrated from generations ago, but I was also ashamed—ashamed that I wasn't fluent in Spanish, ashamed that I didn't know much about my

extended family, and ashamed that I didn't take a more proactive interest in these roots earlier in my life. I felt my prime for cultural immersion had passed.

It was around this time that I began graduate school at Texas State University. Coincidentally, one of the first people I met upon moving to San Marcos was a guy named Josh who is also mixed, though my opposite: his mother is White and his father is Latinx. As time went on, we became close friends. It was comforting to know someone who had also struggled to reconcile their racial identity. The other friends I made in the program, though mostly White, generally made me feel accepted and exhibited a sense of inclusivity, which should come as no surprise in this hyper-academic environment. This is not to say that non-academic environments typically harbor discriminatory tendencies more than academic ones; I only mean to point out that because academic environments tend to reflect niche slices of the general population with particular interests, diversity does not always thrive. Indeed, students of color in my close circles have complained about what they perceive to be a lack of racial representation and recognition in the academy. While I have not in the past internalized this perception with the degree of fervor they have expressed, I have been the subject of and witness to cases of ignorant oversight on the part of faculty.

For instance, a professor once said that I looked like his sister, and asked if I was Italian, which is not a serious mischaracterization, and thus, a seemingly innocent case of stereotyping; however, in a small seminar class this same professor once claimed that he did not see color, championing his colorblind sensibility with smug pride. These incidents, though surely not indicative of the faculty as a whole, remind me of times in my life when I received similar comparisons and justifications. One of my closest friends

is Pakistani-American, and when I would accompany her to weddings or other family gatherings, people often assumed I was Persian. These mistaken classifications did not bother me, but collectively, they do underscore just how rampant generalizations based on a person's name or appearance are, and also, how individuals' conceptions of race and ethnicity often develop alongside their personal and professional relationships. From a technical communication standpoint, it is interesting to see how these social codifications manifest themselves rhetorically, a question I was recently forced to consider more seriously.

While searching for jobs in the Austin-area, I encountered a job application, which prompted a response I was not prepared for: anger. The application was fairly standard, until I came to its question about race and ethnicity. Like many applications, both job and college-based, the application's question was divided into two parts. The first question inquired about Hispanic or Latinx origins, while the second asked applicants to select their race. Because I am mixed and choose to acknowledge my Hispanic roots, I selected "Yes" for the first question with the intention of also selecting White as my race. However, once I made this first selection, the options for race were disabled, barring me from making any further selections. If I were a mixed individual of Hispanic and Black heritage or any other combination, I would not be able to represent this in my application. I would not have a choice, simply because of how the designers of the application have chosen to treat Hispanic or Latinx heritage.

This may be an extreme case, but it caused me to consider other recent situations when I was asked to classify race, namely in my ApplyTexas application upon applying to Texas State University. In my own struggle to communicate race, I wondered how

White/Latinx individuals managed similar circumstances when completing various forms and documents, a process that has always seemed problematic, and therefore, motivated me to pursue further investigation. For, if we recognize that racial categories in particular are social constructions—deeply subjective and ever-changing—then we can begin to understand the conundrum many individuals toeing racial boundaries face, and how these challenges play out in various contexts.

### **Main Research Concerns**

In the last decade work exploring race, ethnicity, and identity has begun to emerge within the field of technical communication, instituting a new guard of socially-attuned scholarship. For activists both within and outside the academy, it is clear that by the absence of substantial work on these issues that technical communicators have a responsibility to examine them more carefully and critically.

Previously, scholarship within the discipline has been hesitant to approach this intersection, as evidenced by the proliferation of international and cross-cultural business writing research that monopolized the field early on (Hunsinger, 2006; Thrush, 1993; Weiss, 1998; Weiss, 1993). Given the number of studies published on global business practices and pedagogy, a focus on more localized issues of culture is not only ideal, but necessary. The field would benefit in particular from work which interprets social constructions of race and ethnicity and their function in quantitative documentation, especially concerning biracial and multiracial individuals, as these documents are often used to create and sustain policy at the local, state, and national level.

What's more, the studies and research that specifically explore questions of hybrid racial and ethnic identity tend to approach these topics from a sociological

standpoint (Jiménez, 2004; Moreman, 2011; Zack, 2010), which is useful for understanding identity and its metaphysical significance, but less so for the specific role technical communicators play in writing and designing documentation, a process which involves strategic, rhetorical motives—in this case, developing personas and questions that effectively and ethically gather sensitive data about subjective and socially constructed characteristics such as race and ethnicity. Still, other disciplines such as rhetoric and composition and developmental education more pointedly address issues of hybrid racial identity (Anderson, 2015; Gonzalez, 2010; Villanueva, 1999). Thus, as the field of technical communication continues to grow, an increase in scholarship surrounding these issues is necessary for a more comprehensive understanding of identity and its relationship to professional writing. While some research exploring dual identity and technical communication exists (Rosario, 2014), more can be done to curb this deficit. If the field wishes to truly become more inclusive, it would be irresponsible to continue such foundational explorations without seriously addressing issues of identity.

Accordingly, this study sought to explore how biracial individuals, specifically those with mixed White/Latinx backgrounds, i.e. individuals with one White parent and one Latinx or Latinx-American parent, feel about the way race and ethnicity are presented in questions that solicit this information and how they respond to such questions. In particular, this study attempted to assess whether technical documents that request deeply personal and sometimes complex data elicit emotional responses, to see whether these seemingly mundane forms trigger more internal struggles of identity for biracial individuals.

From a technical communication standpoint, the perception is that these questions

are simply part and parcel of these documents and nothing more. However, this perception may be shortsighted, craftily shaped and systematized by the institutions and organizations that wish to perpetuate this view. As technical communicators, we are taught to be objective in the documentation—especially quantitative documentation—we create, a practice which ultimately benefits and affirms these perceptions. However, should these best practices apply in every situation? If we adjust these practices, what do we stand to lose? Or better yet, what do we stand to gain?

Abundant research exists in the realm of race and ethnic studies and related fields pertaining to specific cultural groups. However, research surrounding biracial and multiethnic individuals is still highly lacking, and relying on scholarship and research that focuses solely on monoracial and monoethnic individuals does not duly satisfy pertinent questions about the biracial and multiracial experience, especially in our field. Their experiences hinge on membership in multiple racial and/or ethnic groups, whether or not they are fully accepted and recognized by those groups. Therefore, investigating multiracial White/Latinx individuals provides perspective into unique—and sometimes uncomfortable—questions and situations that are rarely discussed on a day-to-day basis. Racial tensions of the past and present tend to focus on the prejudice and discrimination between races and ethnicities with largely unified identities, albeit differences in class, age, sex, and other factors. Consequently, while mixed individuals adopt the identities of the various groups they identify with, the manifestation of a unified identity is likely to vary from person to person, resulting in various forms of marginalization and segmentation across the biracial community.

Moreover, a number of studies have examined the U.S. Census Bureau's



management of race-related questions, thus fostering a rich knowledge base of research. Yet, little commentary exists about this issue in college applications. Certainly, the data gathered about the census is useful for understanding the general population, but less so for younger adults who decide to apply to college, both at the undergraduate and graduate level. In the latter context, the stakes are higher and more immediate as affirmative action is concerned, for the cost-benefit returns sometimes depend on an individual's race and how they self-identify; as the 2013 Supreme Court case *Fisher v. University of Texas* shows, debate about this topic is alive and well. Therefore, evaluating the meaning and implications of race-specific questions is critical as responses to these questions have the potential to yield tangible outcomes for students of color, including White/Latinx individuals.

To bridge this gap within the context of documentation, I attempted to answer the following questions:

- 1) Do forms like the ApplyTexas application influence or shape reporting of race for mixed White/Latinx individuals? If so, how?
- 2) Is the application effective in its presentation of racial classification?

Such inquiries offer possibilities for understanding how mixed White/Latinx individuals construct their personal identities, how they feel about the way race and ethnicity are presented in quantitative documentation, and how they ultimately choose to respond in these situations. As technical communicators, it is necessary that we ask whether questions like these can and should be enhanced to better serve biracial and multiracial individuals, both in the way the questions are written and visually presented, and to what degree greater cultural perceptions about race shape their development, as they may have

real consequences.

To answer these questions, I employed qualitative methods. Specifically, I conducted one-on-one interviews and mini focus groups with first-time college freshmen and graduate students to examine key terminology used and overall design of the ApplyTexas form in comparison to the 2010 U.S. Census form and Common Application (See Appendix A), and understand how personal and educational experience affect perception. Consequently, these methods offered interesting insights into how identity manifests itself in various contexts, both socially and rhetorically.

## **Background**

### *ApplyTexas Application and Common Application*

Because no substantial research has been conducted on the design of college applications from a technical communication perspective, it is helpful to situate the ApplyTexas application in context as a standalone document. Unlike many colleges, universities, and other higher education institutions which individually manage their own applications, Texas has established a centralized application through ApplyTexas. As its website explains, “ApplyTexas was created through a collaborative effort between the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the colleges and universities represented on the site” (“About ApplyTexas,” 2007). Thus, applicants applying to a Texas college or university do so using this online portal. Texas’s system is not wholly unique, however.

While many colleges handle admissions privately, operating separate—mostly electronic—application systems, in the last few decades many have adopted the Common Application. Like ApplyTexas, the Common Application is a centralized application

system, though it serves a wider range of institutions across the United States and abroad, with more than 600 member institutions (“Member Institutions,” 2015). Created in 1975 by 16 private institutions, “the Common Application (CA) is a voluntary not-for-profit membership organization that provides a common admissions application that students can submit to any member institution” (Ehrenberg & Liu, 2009, p. 49). The Common Application’s main purpose is to make it easier for students to apply to college, especially because most apply to multiple institutions at once. Many colleges and universities have similar requirements, therefore the application is designed to reduce redundancy and expedite the process. Still, the application includes additional questions and requirements specific to each institution, making it a comprehensive and convenient alternative. Other standard applications have been created such as the Universal College Application—currently supported by 44 member institutions—but none as widespread as the Common Application (“Colleges,” n.d.). However, significant is that the Common Application was used as a model to develop the ApplyTexas application.

According to Deller (2014), almost 12 years ago, “Under political pressure to further simplify the [application] process for students, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board created the Texas Common Application, later renamed ApplyTexas to avoid a conflict with CommonApp” (p. 11). Deller explains that “Public universities were required to join the Texas site” (p. 11), while private institutions were allowed to choose whether or not to participate. As a result, the Common Application’s history and popularity make it a worthy case for comparison as we examine how it and ApplyTexas’s application present questions about race and ethnicity. Yet, while both the ApplyTexas application and Common Application serve as convenient counterparts, the strategies

they employ for presenting race and ethnicity are still dictated by federal standards issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the U.S. Department of Education, which regulate federal statistics and administrative reporting protocol for both general and educational purposes.

Updated in 2007, the latest guidelines for collecting federal education data allow

...individuals to self-identify their ethnicity and race, and permits individuals to select more than one race and/or ethnicity. This change authorizes individuals to more accurately reflect their racial and ethnic background by not limiting responses to only one racial or ethnic category, and expands reporting options to seven categories (American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, and Two or More Races). The Department recognizes that this change requires additional changes to the education information systems of state agencies, school districts, and postsecondary institutions across the country. (“New Race and Ethnicity Guidance for the Collection of Federal Education Data,” 2008)

While institutions may tailor forms to satisfy certain needs, the categories themselves and selection guidelines are non-negotiable, and thus, must be included in the forms’ questions. Legally, this regulation is helpful for situating the ApplyTexas application as a statewide college application which operates under federal regulations.

#### *Texas State University*

Because this study focuses on first-time undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at Texas State University, we must consider these factors with the university’s

profile in mind. Located in San Marcos, Texas, Texas State University is a 4-year public Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), offering both undergraduate and graduate programs. As of Fall 2015, the university boasted an enrollment of 37,979 students, split between 33,480 undergraduate and 4,499 graduate students (“Students—Texas State University College Portrait,” n.d.). Racially and ethnically, 49% of the undergraduate population (16,424 students) identified as White, 35% identified as Hispanic (11,586), and 3% identified as being two or more races (1,155), with 98% of the population identifying Texas as their place of origin (“Students—Texas State University College Portrait,” n.d.). Reporting on their experiences with diverse groups of people and ideas, 89% of senior undergraduates “reported their experience at this institution contributed to their understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds” and “80% of seniors often had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity,” figures which shed positive light on Texas State’s overall culture (“Student Experiences,” n.d.). While these figures offer useful quantitative insight into Texas State’s racial and ethnic profile, they lack necessary qualitative insight about students’ backgrounds and experiences, namely those that are racially and ethnical diverse, which this study ultimately sought to uncover.

## **II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This section surveys crucial works that have thus far shaped race-specific scholarship, examining key theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and findings that inform this emergent, yet thriving, area of study. While this study primarily situates itself within technical communication, important works from neighboring disciplines such as education and sociology are also key for understanding the relationship between identity formation and expression in documentation, the central concern of this study. Moreover, several studies have addressed White/Latinx identity in various contexts, which I used to carefully develop my own. However, in explaining their methodologies and findings—while informative and indispensable—I will attempt to underscore missed opportunities and topics of inquiry that this study sought to address.

### **Race and Technical Communication**

Pedagogues and practitioners alike often discuss the need for new theoretical lenses and methodologies to better serve the unique territory technical communication occupies within various academic and professional contexts. It is neither rhetoric nor purely technical, but an amalgamation of the two. As a result, this section examines some of the burgeoning theories and frameworks by which race has been interpreted in the field thus far, and more importantly, their contribution to my work on hybrid and biracial Latinx identities.

During the latter part of the twentieth century, much of the culturally focused research within technical communication concentrated on restructuring international business writing pedagogy and practices. For instance, in “‘The Gods Must Be Crazy’: The Challenge of the Intercultural,” Weiss (1993) addresses intercultural and cross-

cultural communication's "potential for old and new misunderstandings," specifically examining cultural construction, cultural heterogeneity, modes of intercultural communication, and recommendations for teaching a unit on intercultural communication in technical and business communication courses (p. 197). Weiss establishes a logic by which cultures inform each other from within and outside themselves, explaining that, "Although all cultures see the world according to their own heritage and history, immediate contexts also shape meanings, and in multicultural contexts, those meanings must be constructed partly anew each time by speakers and writers, listeners and readers, across their differences of language, culture, and worldviews" (p. 197). Weiss summarizes this notion, stating, "A culture is not only an acquisition but it is also an open-ended construction" (p. 199). In particular, Weiss asserts that because language is itself open-ended and vulnerable to evolution, culture inevitably changes as well. Therefore, while we perceive cultures as unified entities, they are inherently fractured and ever-changing due to interaction with other entities, both within and outside the culture itself. Thus, by Weiss's logic, even dominant cultural structures, which many see as static, are capable of change when agents of that culture confront others.

Conversely, when we talk about underrepresented racial and ethnic groups as nuanced and "othered," these characterizations appear false and simplistic because all cultures—dominant and repressed—contain and express nuance in ways that are appropriate to that particular culture. For these reasons, Weiss concludes that cultures come into being both inter- and intra-culturally, which despite common belief, results in cultural hybridity, not purity. While Weiss's concerns may not cross over into localized issues of race or biracial identity, his ideas are useful for understanding how culture

shapes language and vice versa, a crucial relationship to consider when examining documentation such as the U.S. Census, employee profile reports, college applications, and others, since these use specific terms—“race,” “ethnicity,” “origin,” “culture,” “heritage,” “other”—to frame and define identity.

In “The New Historicism and Studies in the History of Business and Technical Writing,” Dillon (1997) extends these concerns, and makes a case for deploying a new historicist framework for analyzing business and technical writing. Dillon explains that “practitioners of new historicism draw from history, literary criticism, anthropology, sociology, Marxism, feminism—in short, from the dominant strains of postmodernism” (p. 65). For those who aim to study the creation and effects of race-based documentation, new historicism has the potential to draw out the oftentimes gradual developments of such social constructions over time. Thus, new historicism fuses history with literary criticism to reveal social impact.

Shifting from praxis to pedagogy, Dillon champions new historicism’s potential for emerging practitioners, claiming that this critical approach “should help us teach our students to read as new historicists—to recognize that their writing continues a rich, complex, and very old cultural tradition, yes, but also to enable them to frame more usefully the writing they produce and receive in terms of power, authority, culture, and economic necessity” (p. 72). Dillon’s statement at once grants documentation and those that produce it agency, as he urges those within the realm of technical communication to examine the rhetorical position—and power—they possess in an often schematized hierarchy of language and culture.

With the publication of Williams and Pimentel’s 2012 Special Issue of *Journal of*



*Business and Technical Communication* and their collection *Communicating Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in Technical Communication*, it is clear that those within the field care about these issues. After distributing a call for papers for their Special Issue, Williams and Pimentel received many positive responses and submissions to these issues, and therefore, saw a need for a book length anthology. An overdue resource, the anthology includes articles surrounding issues of racial representation in various social and professional sectors, activist networks, education, and more.

In her introduction to the book, Williams mimics previous sentiments, claiming “we [in the technical communication community] lag behind our colleagues in other areas of English studies (literature, rhetoric and composition, and creative writing) in finding ways to wrestle with two core elements of American identity—race and ethnicity” (p. 1). She explains that the book’s purpose “is to move our field’s discussion beyond issues of diversity in the practice of technical communication, which is certainly important, to discussions of how race and ethnicity inform the production and distribution of technical communication within the United States” (p. 1). Williams’s distinction here is notable because it acknowledges the fact that historically, scholarship in the field has failed to account for the rhetorical choices tied to race and ethnicity that may have larger implications for technical communication theory and praxis, especially as social justice is concerned. Luckily, as Williams’s and Pimentel’s collection—and Special Issue—demonstrates, valuable works about these matters are being produced and brought to the fore, chief among them issues of intersectionality, a subject Rosario (2014) examines in her work.

Rosario, a technically trained engineer-turned-creative writer, considers her

multifaceted identity, both professionally and personally. As a woman of color, Rosario writes about her Afro-Latino identity, as well as her journey from civil engineering to fiction writing, constructing physical, metaphorical, and emotional bridges throughout the piece to discuss gender, racial, occupational, and even, literary binaries that hinge on Eurocentric ideologies. Recounting her family's move to the United States from the Dominican Republic, Rosario explains that they "were New York City's most recent immigrants and, in a new country whose racial discourse is so dichotomized, were constantly being asked, 'What are you?'" (p. 158), a question many biracial minorities find themselves subject to. To such questions, Rosario says she "struggled to explain that it is possible to identify racially as Black and ethnically as Hispanic" (p. 158), a struggle many individuals must endure interpersonally and also when classifying race and ethnicity on official documentation.

In the end, Rosario's discussion of racial and ethnic identification speaks to a larger notion of subjectivity concerning race: individuals construct identity based on social practices, racial and ethnic performativity, geographic origin, spoken language, as well as other factors. Consequently, documentation-based definitions and questions about race eliminate these subjective characteristics, a subject Pimentel and Balzhiser (2012) address in their article "The Double Occupancy of Hispanics: Counting Race and Ethnicity in the U.S. Census."

Following Dillon's lead, Pimentel and Balzhiser leverage new historicism in their examination of the 2010 U.S. Census form, demonstrating its value and utility in evaluating quantitative-based documentation. In "The Double Occupancy of Hispanics: Counting Race and Ethnicity in the U.S. Census," Pimentel and Balzhiser conduct a

critical, new historicist analysis of the 2010 U.S. Census form, paying special attention to questions related to Hispanic origin and race, and ultimately conclude that the current questions do two things: they effectively monitor the U.S. Hispanic population and also inflate the White population, findings that imply racial discrimination in not only policy making, but the fabric of American culture, a fact that is reminiscent of Dillon's critique of culture power structures.

Pimentel and Balzhiser establish the importance of the U.S. Census form, not only as a rhetorical, but cultural artifact. Framing the form's magnitude of significance, they present the stakes by which to understand its reach, claiming that "for a document as important as the U.S. Census—a document that not only is read by nearly every U.S. household but costs 15 billion dollars to administer and influences major federal and local funding decisions—transparency, usability, and bias-free language are paramount," and serve as the characteristics by which Pimentel and Balzhiser conduct their analysis (p. 312). From an accessibility and usability standpoint, they find that more families than ever had access to the 2010 form, citing improved distribution tactics, as well as the creation of a standardized, bilingual form. However, despite the bureau's concerted efforts to improve its "usability and accessibility, the census form, even in this 2010 rendition, perpetuates ongoing problematic response patterns and even nonresponses, which ultimately reinforce racial constructs and inequities," an observation which preempts a deeper analysis of the form's questions themselves (p. 312).

Because Hispanics operate as the target demographic for their examination, Pimentel and Balzhiser consider the form from this particular cultural perspective. Accordingly they suggest that the "census form is problematic...not because it includes

questions about Hispanic identity, as such questions were actually requested by many Latino organizations (Hirschman et al., 2000), but rather because Hispanic is designated as an ethnic, not a racial, identity. More specifically, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defined Hispanic origin and race as ‘two separate and distinct concepts’” (p. 319), which Pimentel and Balzhiser astutely point out does “not map onto actual social practices that racialize Hispanic identity in nonwhite racial terms and in which many Hispanics identify racially as Hispanic or Latino, not white or black” (p. 319). In the end, “even though the OMB added a Hispanic identity question to the census form, many Hispanics still have to choose a racial category that does not represent their racial identity” (p. 319).

The concerns Pimentel and Balzhiser raise inform not just the Hispanic or Latinx experience, but also the biracial Latinx experience. As this analysis confirms, many Hispanics do not recognize “White” as a valid descriptor for their racial background, rather seeing themselves as a distinctly non-White racial group. Thus, for biracial Latinx individuals, juggling preconceived notions of Hispanic origin and race may draw pause when completing forms like these because they must reconcile not only the definitions offered them, but also their own. As Pimentel and Balzhiser conclude, “The formulation of the Hispanic origin question as a distinct ethnic but not racial inquiry is also problematic in the sense that race is stripped from the concept of Hispanic,” a truth many Hispanics—both mixed and not—must confront (p. 323). In the end, their analysis serves as a sobering reminder that the “way we interpret texts constitutes the way we interpret ourselves” (p. 313). If we are to take the Census form’s definitions of race—both definite and implied—at face value, it should come as no surprise that the way we

choose to identify on such forms ultimately reinforces their persuasive power.

Similarly, Ramirez Johnson, O. Pimentel, and C. Pimentel (2008) leverage new historicism to analyze the portrayal of native New Mexicans in technical documents produced by the New Mexico Bureau of Immigration (NMBI), including “The Legend of Montezuma” and “Illustrated New Mexico.” They claim that “...technical communicators traditionally have paid little or no attention to producing accurate or even approximately close portrayals of racial others,” by which they mean native New Mexicans (p. 211). Accordingly, Ramirez Johnson et al. leverage historical critiques on business and technical writing, as well as whiteness theory to illuminate the inequities that endanger cultures when documentation is written from the perspective of dominant racial frameworks, in this case, a white-centric frame of mind.

In particular, they claim that, To boost the tourism economy in New Mexico, historians and brochure writers either painted the native people as “the exotic Indian” or decontextualized them until they became “curious and quaint” (p. 212), a fact that demonstrates how documentation was written and distributed in ways that reinforced the dominant cultural paradigms of the time. Rhetorically, for those interested in settling in New Mexico, these brochures conveyed a false narrative they were not only drawn to, but also invited to maintain and construct anew.

From a technical communication standpoint, these observations are telling, for they highlight the idea that written communication—a more permanent and widely distributed form of exchange—codifies these narratives and worldviews. Like other works previously discussed regarding culture, Johnson et al.’s examination does not deal in matters of biracial or bicultural identity directly, but it nonetheless underscores the

ease by which governmental institutions may repress underrepresented demographics— rhetorically and otherwise—in favor of often majority white worldviews. Thus, when considering biracial individuals with one White parent, predominantly White-driven narratives have the potential to create confusion concerning identity, especially on forms that directly ask individuals to classify race and ethnicity. If a culture subscribes to a particular worldview consistent with the majority population, the documentation it generates—and the language used to write it—is in many ways a direct byproduct of that culture’s common ideology. It is through this process, then, that minority groups and those on the fringe of dominant cultures must navigate identity.

### **Critical Racial Frameworks**

To fully elucidate the unique experiences of biracial individuals one must draw from other disciplines such as race and ethnic studies, communication studies, education, and sociology, for these perspectives offer insight about the social factors that influence cultural practices.

Like new historicism, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is among the theoretical frameworks most pertinent for examining race, especially regarding issues of the biracial and multiracial experience. In “What Are You? A CRT Perspective on the Experiences of Mixed Race Persons in ‘Post-Racial’ America,” Anderson (2015) claims that “...the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to understand the experiences of persons of mixed racial backgrounds offers both a theoretical grounding to assess the proposition that the nation has moved beyond race and a demonstration of the analytical power of CRT” (p. 2), a critical lens which “fully acknowledges the socially constructed nature of race...and the ongoing influence of this construct” (p. 4), which has emerged from an extended history

of structural determinism within the United States. Described by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic as “the idea that our system, by reason of its structure and vocabulary, cannot redress certain types of wrong” (2001), structural determinism has the potential to “prevent members of society from being able to envision and name a new or different concept that could lead to greater racial justice” (p. 4). From here, Anderson addresses specific issues of mixed race heritage, focusing on the one-drop rule. She explains that in the past, “According to this rule of hypodescent, any person with ‘one-drop’ of African American blood was considered to be African American regardless of the number of white ancestors” (p. 5). As a result, “These historically-contingent definitions of whiteness and blackness ensured that thousands of mixed race persons were viewed as monoracial” (p. 5), a practice which has helped to preserve binary, racial thinking, an idea explored further in this study.

### **Modeled Orientations of Identity**

Before understanding the rhetorical moves and motivations behind any document that concerns race or ethnicity, it is important to first understand the social codes and characteristics that shape current perceptions about race, so that we can appropriately contextualize White/Latinx identity. Thus, the following section focuses specifically on models and methods used to orient identity and key findings regarding the bicultural and multiracial experience.

Over the last few decades, research on native and immigrant U.S. Hispanic and Latinx populations has been on the rise, spanning various disciplines and subjects, from the economic to the political to the social and beyond. To that end, models have been created by various scholars to understand how these factors work in tandem to shape

one's identity, Susan E. Keefe and Amado M. Padilla's Typology of Mexican American Ethnic Orientation (1987) being the most foundational. Like many, their model measures the degree to which Mexican American individuals divest themselves of their Mexican heritage.

Building on these models and others like it, Vasti Torres's (2003) Bicultural Orientation Model (BOM) seeks to understand the specific challenges that Latinx students face in college settings. The model contains four main quadrants: bicultural orientation, Latina/o orientation, Anglo orientation, and marginal orientation. Using qualitative interviews to develop and apply the model, Torres found that most students "were placed in either the Bicultural or Anglo Orientation quadrants" (p. 167), which suggests that many students acculturate in some way to the dominant culture. She finds that three main conditions influence individuals' identity: the environment in which they grew up, family and generational influences, and self-perception of status in society (p. 55-56).

Although Torres's model was devised to understand non-White Latinx individuals, it is nevertheless applicable to the lives and orientation of mixed White/Latinx individuals because it frames essential characteristics that are exclusive to the Latinx experience, aims that correspond with this study, particularly in my approach to the one-on-one interviews. However, because my study takes as its focus biracial Latinx individuals, it is important to discuss models that may offer more nuanced approaches to that process, namely those that measure identity's intersectional nature.

To satisfy this need L'Heureux Lewis and Bell (2006) developed their Intersectional Model of Identity (IMI). The four main components that define their model



include individual characteristics, social contexts, reference group orientation, and situation of encounter. L'Heureux Lewis and Bell offer a rationale behind their model, explaining that, "Though the sociology and psychology literatures have extensively covered racial identity, neither sociological nor psychological perspectives on identity development give enough credence to the role of race in one's personal *and* social identity development" (p. 249). Thus, they contend that that their new model more effectively aggregates this intersection and its many characteristics.

Accordingly, they explain each component and offer examples for context. In a modeled sense, individual characteristics seeks to account for the "overlapping and hierarchical ranking of an individual's social group membership," thus, further framing an individual's class within their social paradigm (p. 257). Relatedly, social context acknowledges the various social situations individual confront as they attempt to shape and reshape identity; L'Heureux Lewis and Bell define three main levels—international, intranational, and local. While they note that these contexts specifically influence the identification process of African Americans in the United States, citing the slavery as a basis for this relationship, one can see how these contexts apply to other cultural groups such as Hispanics and Latinxs, who themselves maintain strong cross-national and regional conceptions of identity, which span countries and continents. Lastly, they explain the concept of reference group orientation, claiming that, "In the case of multiracial individuals who espouse protean identities, their reference group is informed by the surrounding social and situational contexts" (p. 259), and conclude that reference groups merely provide a "structure for organizing the self" (p. 258).

While these first three concepts are crucial to their model, L'Heureux Lewis and

Bell place great emphasis on the last component, situation of encounter, which “refers to the specific context in which identity’s salience shifts” (p. 260). They explain that in these cases, “The individual is required to place more effort into information processing in the face of an immediate situation” (p. 260). While they do not offer specific parameters by which to define particular situations of encounter, one can see how the process of classifying race in documentation fits the mold, for this encounter forces individuals to think about their race in a particular context.

L’Heureux Lewis and Bell’s model provides a useful scale by which to parse out critical aspects of one’s identity. Even with their established components, they acknowledge that the degree to which each one influences individuals’ identity varies. As a result, there is no stable continuum or model that can truly quantify identity’s intersectional reality. In relation to my own study, their emphasis on situations of encounter felt particularly useful as I crafted both the one-on-one and focus group questions which sought to simulate the experience of completing and reviewing race-race documentation. In this way, the IMI served as a strong impetus for the social versus situational aims of this study.

Still, while these previous models account for multiple factors that shape one’s identity, others like Wijeyesinghe’s (2012) Intersectional Model of Multiracial Identity (IMMI) attempt to accommodate intersectional aspects of identity not yet considered. Inspired by Jones and McEwen’s (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) and the galaxy as metaphorical inspiration, Wijeyesinghe developed the model to map an “Multiracial individual’s ‘personal galaxy’ of factors that influence her choice and experience of racial identity,” for it “grows and expands as she encounters new

experiences and situations” (p. 100). Aside from common factors such as racial ancestry, physical appearance, and cultural development and attachment, the model also includes spirituality, political awareness and orientation, and global experiences, which together, offer more range by which to understand one’s intersectionality. While my study did not inquire about participants’ spiritual or political leanings—focusing mainly on early formative experiences, relationships with family and peers, and education level—these factors serve as useful subtext, and might add value in an expanded study.

Indeed, the models discussed herein represent only a mere snapshot of previously developed models of identity as there are many more. However, these serve as helpful tools because they help to communicate the capricious nature of not only identity, but multiracial and multiethnic identities in particular. Still, employing more nuanced, qualitative approaches offer alternative perspectives and avenues by which to learn from multiracial and multiethnic individuals and demarcate identity.

### **Situating Biracial and Multiethnic Latinx Identity**

In one of the first studies to specifically examine multiethnic identity, Jiménez (2004) presents findings that are essential to conceptualizing the multiethnic experience. Jiménez interviewed 20 college-educated individuals between the ages of 20 and 30 in Santa Clara County, California, and found that “multiethnic Mexican Americans gravitate toward a Mexican American identity because it is the most readily available ethnic identity in their social environment. However, when multiethnic Mexican Americans assert a Mexican American identity, they confront ethnic boundaries, or a sharp division between ethnic categories, that influence the extent to which they feel free to assert any one particular identity” (p. 76). He also notes the importance of proximity and place for

notions of identity, explaining that, “Multiethnic individuals who live in regions where there is a large number of multiethnic individuals, such as the US state of Hawaii, have a rich and commonly used vocabulary for identifying persons of multiple ethnic backgrounds, and are thus more likely to identify themselves as multiethnic. In contrast, those who live in regions where unmixed groups predominate more often choose a single ethnic identity because there is no ready-made language for describing their ethnic hybridity” (p. 77). Consequently, Jiménez’s findings and commentary demonstrate the importance of language as a figurative symbol for establishing one’s literal identity, a fact which often complicates the way multiracial and multiethnic individuals discuss and classify identity, especially if we consider written contexts, which my study sought to more thoroughly understand.

Moreman (2011) sought to build on Jiménez’s findings to explore how mixed Latina/o-White individuals perform racial hybridity. Drawing upon performance studies as well as current discourse about race and ethnicity, Moreman exposes the difficulty many mixed individuals—particularly those that are Latina/o-White—have when communicating their identity, citing that Whites and Latina/os share a unique, historical relationship.

To explore these line of inquiry, Moreman conducted qualitative interviews with nine individuals to gather a more comprehensive perspective on their experiences. Among the central characteristics that interviewees deemed central to their Latina/o-White identity were family ties, food, Spanish proficiency, and skin color. Specifically, Moreman finds that “Because being Latina/o means being part of a particular ethnicity and not of a particular race, Latinas/os can and do exist as part of one of the five races.

Although the categories change with the changing views of society, these racial labels are the predominant categorizations for us as we enact our cultural identities as social actors” (p. 197).

In the end, these interviews revealed central tensions between individuals’ personal conceptions of identity and the dominant culture’s, and lend credibility to Moreman’s assertion that “The struggle between self-agency and social determinants is part of the process of understanding and expressing our raciality” (p. 197). Moreman concludes that when it comes to Latina/o-White hybrid identity, it is often framed as matter of choice, one “controlled [by] practices of inclusion and exclusion with Whiteness at its center” (p. 213). Therefore, he found that the participants in his study could not successfully create true spaces of racial hybridity because they are continuously “making gestures back and forth between identities” (p. 212). Moreman’s emphasis on whiteness is especially critical for the purposes of my study in extrapolating the liminal space Hispanic and Latinx origins occupy within the established racial schema because they are often designated as ethnic, not racial, markers. Still, while Moreman’s study defined essential qualities that shape performance of racial identity, it does not share quantitative data about how these individuals specifically choose to classify themselves, both in everyday and formal contexts.

Fortunately, more current findings show a move toward synthesizing this relationship. In a recent study, Miyawaki (2015) sought to assess how mixed Latinx individuals classify their race on the census and how they feel about the separate Hispanic origin question format. Conducting interviews with 50 mixed Latinx individuals with one White, Black, or Asian parent in the New York area, Miyawaki found that,

“With the exception of one, all respondents marked “yes” to the Hispanic origin question,” and “just over half of Latino/whites and Latino/blacks marked “white” and “black,” accordingly, and two thirds of Latino/Asians selected “Asian” (p. 6), demonstrating that a majority of respondents represented both their Latinx and non-Latinx origins. Common factors that contributed to their reporting patterns included available options, parental background, social and political disobedience, and physical appearance.

A noteworthy dimension of Miyawaki’s study involved having participants respond a question from the 2010 Census Alternative Questionnaire Experimentation (AQE), which combines Hispanic and Latino origins and race into one question. He found that “Part-Latinos (88 percent) overwhelmingly reported a Hispanic origin in combination with other races and origins” (p. 11). Surprisingly, however, “Although 55 percent of Latino/whites, 53 of Latino/blacks, and 67 percent of Latino/Asians checked “white,” “black,” and “Asian,” respectively, in the census race question, none of them did so in the AQE “race or origin” question” (p. 11). Specifically, “For all three part-Latino groups, “multiracial” responses more than doubled from the 2010 census to the 2010 AQE. Whereas 30 percent of Latino/whites, 40 percent of Latino/blacks, and 20 percent of Latino/Asians reported two or more races in the 2010 census, 88 percent of Latino/whites, 92 percent of Latino/blacks, and 93 percent of Latino/Asians selected multiple categories in the 2010 AQE” (p. 11). When asked about how they felt about the combined version of the question, respondents were split in their responses. Miyawaki comments that for those who favored this new version, their support “may stem from the continued racialization of Latinos as nonwhites,” an observation which mirrors those

made by previous studies (Pimentel & Balzhiser, 2012). Conversely, those who did not support the new version discussed the ways appearance and origin complicate Hispanic and Latino identity in ways that make its inclusion seem counterintuitive to the concept of race.

Miyawaki's study offers invaluable insight into how various biracial groups interpret, respond to, and feel about quantitative questions about race, especially in regards to previous work on the census. Perhaps most important is its exploration of how document design affects racial reporting, one of the central questions of my own study. Miyawaki's findings suggest an overwhelming support for the inclusion of Hispanic and Latino origins as a racial category in theory and in practice, as derived from the interviews and responses to the combined origins and race AQE question.

However, while valuable, Miyawaki's study lacks a thorough discussion of specific rhetorical details apart from the question format that affect respondents' feelings about the form, a gap which warrants more careful attention; moreover, neither Miyawaki's nor previous studies have employed focus groups, a component of my study which I hoped would offer a different perspective. Still, following Miyawaki's lead, this study utilized similar theoretical and methodological approaches, though with a critical focus on the rhetoric and design of college application forms, which have yet to be studied, and thus, properly accounted for in literature surrounding this topic.

### III. METHODS

This study employed two different qualitative techniques—one-on-one interviews and mini focus groups—to address my research questions:

- 1) Do forms like the ApplyTexas application influence or shape reporting of race for mixed White/Latinx individuals? If so, how?
- 2) Is the application effective in its presentation of racial classification?

To understand biracial identity in the contexts I have previously laid out, I conducted seven one-on-one interviews, all with mixed White/Latinx participants and two mini focus groups—one with three undergraduate students and one with four graduate students. As previous studies demonstrate, qualitative interviews serve as a useful method by which to gather more nuanced feedback about identity formation. However, because one's personal identity is not wholly separate from the larger collective identity—in many ways, an extension of it—it was necessary to employ a technique that would help frame this relationship. For this reason, focus groups were essential to this study.

As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) contend, focus group research's value lies in its collaborative nature. Specifically, because knowledge is gathered through interactive discussion, this approach can lead to a “different type of data not accessible through individual interviews” because “participants share their views, hear the views of others, and perhaps refine their own views in light of what they have heard” (p. 2-3). Thus, they conclude that “focus groups work best for topics people could talk about to each other in their everyday lives—but don't” (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004, p. 65). This last point speaks not only to conversations about identity, but perhaps more importantly, documentation, for it is likely that most individuals forego extended dialogue about such



granular details unless mediated through organized conversation.

Moreover, the focus groups also offered a unique opportunity to conduct a more in-depth investigation of the forms in question through the use of contextual inquiry, “a field data-gathering technique that studies a few carefully selected individuals in depth to arrive at a fuller understanding of the work practice across all [users]. Through inquiry and interpretation, it reveals commonalities across a system’s [user] base” (Kuniavsky, 2003, p. 160). With this technique, I hoped to engage the common experiences my participants shared as members of the White/Latinx community to assess the documents’ presentation of race, and whether their design satisfied participants’ needs. Consequently, these methods felt appropriate for satisfying the aims of this study.

## **Participants**

For this study, college freshmen were of particular interest because they are on the cusp of adulthood, and consequently, may still be in the process of constructing their identity—sexually, politically, and of course, racially. Conversely, first-time graduate applicants warrant study because they represent individuals who may be more certain about how they classify themselves, given their previous college and life experiences. Thus, examining these groups together allowed me to gauge how each demographic responds independently, and also, see if correlations exist between one’s college and life experiences and formation of identity.

Therefore, to participate in the study, prospective candidates had to meet predetermined criteria: male or female freshmen undergraduate students, ages 17-19—the typical age for most incoming and registered freshmen—or first-year graduate students of mixed, biracial White/Latinx heritage, currently enrolled at Texas State University.

Participants must have also completed the ApplyTexas application.

### *Participant Recruitment*

Because this study involves critically examining documentation, I specifically chose to recruit students from the Department of English, thinking that potential participants were frequently confronting rhetorical questions in their courses, and thus, were likely to engage more thoughtfully with the forms' language and logic. To recruit participants, I prepared and delivered a presentation summarizing my study to freshman composition (English 1310 and 1320) and graduate courses (English 5383 and other foundations courses that approved my visit) in the Department of English at Texas State University.

During these visits, I gave a five minute presentation explaining my study (See Appendix B) and left behind a sign-up sheet for interested students to sign. I also left behind my email address in case students had questions about the study or felt more comfortable signing up to participate through email. I encouraged students to refer prospective candidates for the study as well, which proved critical for recruitment, especially concerning graduate participants. These students received an email about the study that was almost identical to the in-class presentation (See Appendix C). Once I collected and vetted all interested participants, I distributed a formal email and consent form to secure their eligibility and consent.

As Table 1 demonstrates, I successfully recruited seven participants: three undergraduate and four graduate students. Out of the seven participants, two were male and five were female. Although biracial identity—specifically having one White parent and one Latinx parent—was a requirement for participation in this study, not all

participants shared the same patrilineal or matrilineal composition. Of the undergraduate students, 2/3 had a Hispanic father and White mother. For graduate students, the number was split: half of the participants had a Hispanic father and White mother, while the other half had a White father and Hispanic mother. In sum, a slight majority of participants had a Hispanic father and White mother, and by extension, a Spanish-language surname.

Finally, even though recruitment was filtered through English courses, not all students in these courses are English majors, which is especially the case for foundational courses. Because freshman composition courses are a core requirement for most degree requirements, these classes are comprised of students from all disciplines. Thus, in the case of this study's undergraduate participants, none were English majors; instead, one is majoring in art and design, one in criminal justice, and the last has not yet declared a major. Conversely, because the majority of graduate course work is tailored to graduate study in a particular discipline, most courses are comprised of students pursuing that particular major. As a result, all graduate student participants in this study were English majors. Specifically, one is majoring in creative writing, one in literature, and two in technical communication. All names of participants have been changed to preserve anonymity.

**Table 1. Breakdown of Participants**

<b>Undergraduate Students</b>				
	Age	Gender	Latinx Parent	Major
Amelia	< 20	Female	Mother	Art & Design
Samantha	< 20	Female	Father	Criminal Justice
Shane	< 20	Male	Father	Undeclared
<b>Graduate Students</b>				
	Age	Gender	Latinx Parent	Major
Dana	Late 20s	Female	Father	Literature
John	30s	Male	Father	Creative Writing
Kristen	30s	Female	Mother	Technical Communication
Melissa	Late 20s	Female	Mother	Technical Communication

## **One-on-One Interviews**

I conducted the one-on-one interviews in January 2016, most of which took place on the Texas State University campus in San Marcos. To accommodate scheduling conflicts, two of the seven interviews were conducted online via Google Hangouts. On average, each interview lasted between 20-30 minutes.

Because I wanted to understand biracial identity in various contexts, I devised the questions in a top-down manner, first eliciting background information and thoughts regarding general conceptions of identity, and eventually moving into questions about the ApplyTexas application itself with the hope that honest responses and themes would emerge organically.

- Can you describe your racial and ethnic background? Which parent is Latinx/Latinx-American and which parent is White?
- How do you describe yourself to others when asked about your racial or ethnic background? Why?
- What benefits have being racially and/or ethnically mixed afforded you?
- What challenges have being racially and/or ethnically mixed posed?
  - Think back to a time when you experienced difficulty defining your race and/or ethnicity to others? What made it difficult in that particular situation?
- Do you feel marginalized as a biracial individual? There are no clear definitions for what you are or how you should identify. How does this make you feel?

- How do you respond to how your race is portrayed on different documentation?
- When you completed your ApplyTexas application to apply to Texas State University, how did you classify yourself?
  - How did you feel about the available choices or categories?
  - Do you feel like the available choices or categories aligned with how you normally identify yourself?
  - How might you rewrite the questions to make defining your race and ethnicity easier?

Finally, I devised additional questions for graduate students to account for and draw out possible differences as a result of age and experience:

- How did you classify yourself when you completed college applications as a prospective college freshman?
- How has the way you express your racial or ethnic background changed since you were in college, if at all?

### **Mini Focus Groups**

While the one-on-one interviews sought to address participants' personal relationship to and understanding of racial identity in both social interactions and in the ApplyTexas form, the focus groups served a slightly different purpose. Specifically, in these group conversations I attempted to conduct a contextual inquiry of the ApplyTexas form in tandem with the 2010 U.S. Census form and the Common Application. My hope was that this method would yield different insights about the forms' rhetorical construction—both in terms of language and layout—and thus, distinguish the focus

groups from the one-on-one interviews.

To that end, I conducted two separate focus groups, one with undergraduate students and one with graduate students. Both focus groups took place on the Texas State University campus in the Department of English's Usability Lab on February 16, 2016 and February 18, 2016, respectively. Laptops with Internet access were provided for both sessions, which participants used to access online versions of the forms. I also provided participants with printed copies of each and writing utensils.

At the start of each session, I gave a brief summary of each form's origin and use. Then, I asked participants to offer some general thoughts about how race is represented in documentation to prime them for further discussion throughout the session: "How do you respond to how race is portrayed on different documentation like college applications, given that you are biracial?" Because I wanted to simulate the experience of classifying race in documentation, I then had them review and complete the forms. As they read through and completed each one, I encouraged them to record their responses on the printed copies and make notes about each form if they felt inclined to do so, a strategy meant to help facilitate the completion process and preserve their responses and annotations. Overall, this phase of the session took five minutes. With the forms completed, I then asked participants to reflect on their reporting process and discuss various aspects of the forms. The following questions were used to unearth these details:

- Were your responses to each form consistent across the board?
- Which form was easiest to complete? Why?
- Which form was most difficult to complete? Why?

- How do you feel about the language used in these forms? Is it clear or confusing? Why?

Because my study is primarily focused on the quality of the ApplyTexas application, I asked participants to talk about its effectiveness more specifically using the following questions:

- How do you feel about the design of the ApplyTexas application?
- How did you feel about the available choices or categories?
- How might you redesign or rewrite the questions to make defining race and ethnicity easier?

In the end, this scaffolded approach allowed participants to assess the forms collectively before moving on to a more context-specific discussion of each one.

### **Data Analysis**

For archival and investigative purposes, I recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed all interview and focus group exchanges based on themes and foci determined beforehand and throughout the research process using MAXQDA, a computer-assisted qualitative analysis software tool. Because I wished to gain an honest picture of how respondents both shape and perform racial identity, I chose to “allow the codes to emerge during the data analysis” process, the typical approach in the social sciences and humanities, so that I could “form complex theme connections” (Creswell, 2014, p. 199-200). I believe this strategy worked twofold: it aided in harnessing any bias I may have had as I embarked on this study, and it also forced themes to materialize on their own terms. To further aggregate central findings and important themes, I created PowerPoint slides to separate and plot important data points, which proved to be a valuable strategy

for gaining alternative perspectives during the analysis process.



## IV. FINDINGS

What follows are my findings from the one-on-one interviews and focus groups. Each section details the central themes that emerged from the conversations in both environments, which were guided by specific questions and concerns.

### **One-on-one Interviews**

This section details the themes that emerged as paramount foci for understanding the nature of biracial identity and expression among this sampling of undergraduate and graduate participants. Accordingly, these issues are discussed in the following ways: 1) how participants assert identity; 2) how it is constructed; 3) how it is performed; 4) how it is quantified in documentation, namely the ApplyTexas application; and finally, 5) the effectiveness of the ApplyTexas application and suggestions for revision.

#### *Asserting Identity: The Everyday Self*

As noted previously, although all participants fit the parameters for how this study characterizes biracial identity, i.e. having one White and one Hispanic parent, participants' backgrounds are varied, resulting in different ways of thinking about and asserting identity. For instance, 2/3 undergraduate participants have a Hispanic father and White mother, yet they unanimously self-identify as biracial with family and peers.

Amelia, an undergraduate student, spoke about frequently being asked about her cultural background and her responses to this seemingly common question: "Um, I say that I'm Hispanic and white, cus [sic], I mean, like, I don't know, people have a hard time identifying what I am sometimes, I guess. Like they'll come up and ask like "What are you? Where are you from?" Like, well, um, like...yeah, that's kind of, like I never go into too much detail, just because like, I mean I am Hispanic, but my mom never spoke

Spanish.”

Samantha, another undergraduate student, also acknowledges her biracial identity, though in slightly different terms, choosing to say she is half “Mexican” versus half “Hispanic.” She sees the admission of her mixed identity as a gesture of honesty—an obligation of sorts: “I just tell them I’m half Mexican and half white. I don’t really say I’m Hispanic, unless they ask me and then say, yeah, I am. I don’t know why I do that, but I just feel like people should know. Like I’m not just Mexican—I’m white too.”

The last undergraduate student, Shane, while acknowledging his biracial background in the majority of situations, claimed that on occasion he simply identifies as Hispanic, a choice that one could consider a form of code switching; while he is not code switching between languages per se, he is code switching between identities which have specific cultural characteristics, and thus, appropriate contexts for expression.

Contrarily, half of the graduate participants have a Hispanic father and White mother with more variation in how and why they self-identify the way they do with peers. Surprisingly, none of the graduate students identify as biracial. Rather, two identify as Hispanic, one identifies as Mexican, and one identifies as White. In particular, both Dana and John identify as Hispanic, but for different reasons.

Dana explained that her parents had told her to identify as Hispanic, and had thus followed their advice. In contrast, John says he self-identifies as Hispanic “because of [his] last name... [and because] that’s just the side that [he] identified with more growing up.” Similarly, Kristen only identifies as Hispanic when asked, though she identifies specifically as “Mexican”: “I’ve always said I’m Mexican. And I’ve heard very recently about research that’s been done about how people self-identify and I was interested to

learn that that was very representative for Latinos, that most of them self-identify as say, Puerto Rican or Cuban or Mexican or whatever. That's it, you know, that's how they identify themselves. I think that all of us who do that do that because we're answering in a context that's White."

Even so, not all participants identified as biracial or Hispanic. Graduate student Melissa says she identifies as White due to the color of her light skin and father's last name, Lasseter, which she explained her mother kept even after her parents divorced. So, instead of changing her maiden name to her mother's, Gonzalez, she kept her father's surname. Together, these two factors helped to solidify her White identity. These responses show the variation present among participants in how they express identity with peers, and the ways in which factors like one's last name and personal choice affect its portrayal.

#### *Constructing Identity: Familial Influence on Identity*

While all participants self-identify with relative certainty and ease—albeit notable differences between undergraduate and graduate students—their identity origin stories vary considerably. Some participants discussed their identity formation in ways that suggest it emerged independently, while others shared anecdotes that highlighted explicit outside influences, namely familial.

For instance, most of the graduate students acknowledged outside influences on their identity development such as place of birth and the proximity to which they lived close to family, but maintained that they chose for themselves how to identify, save for one, Dana, who as previously noted, identifies as “what [her] parents have told [her] to be”: Hispanic. Similarly, yet perhaps more revealing is the seemingly negative familial

influences that critically shape identity. Amelia, an undergraduate, claimed that only recently had she begun to think seriously about her Hispanic identity due to her family's ongoing subjection/erasure of her Latinx-ness:

...like more recently I've become kind of like, like, identified myself as like half Hispanic, but pretty much my whole life, my family has pretty much like, not looked down upon that, but kind of like, I don't know, they get all weirded out when I say that I'm Hispanic. [...] Every time I say that word "Hispanic" in front of my Hispanic family, they're just like 'You bleed red, white, and blue, and blah, blah, blah, and this and that. You're not from Mexico.' [...] I never, like, I never really thought about it that much up until like maybe the last year or two. I've kind of been like...like 'I'm not all white.' Like, that's not what I am. That's incorrect, so like, I don't know. [...] I wouldn't say I've had any difficulties. It's just like the weird attitude from my family. Like, it's just weird how they, like—they don't own up to their heritage.

And still, there are formative, yet enigmatic, forces and experiences that shaped some participants' identity in troubling, and perhaps, more extreme ways. For instance, undergraduate student Samantha spoke openly about the self-hatred she harbored as a child over being half Hispanic:

I don't know, like, whenever I was little, like, just for some reason, I was just so mad that I was Hispanic. Um, I don't know. Like I said, when I was a kid, I don't know why, it was just, I was not okay with being Mexican for some strange reason. It's just me—I was a cry baby. But now, I've

definitely grown out of that. Like, I'm okay with being who I am.

I did not press Samantha about why she felt this way, despite being alarmed by this candid admission of what one could perceive as self-hatred. One could attribute this sentiment to undisclosed people or moments of influence in her childhood or to general stigma directed toward individuals of Latinx or Mexican descent which she internalized and expressed as self-hatred. Whatever the case, it is an impactful sensibility that has many possible origins including family, peers, the media, and other sources.

*Performing Identity: Self-Identification among Peers*

Just as family and more obvious identifiers like skin color and surname influence identity formation, situations involving peers may also be emblematic of one's biracial experience, namely in one's formative years. Friend groups and perceptions about race seem especially significant, namely for the graduate students who, on the whole older than the undergraduate participants, have more life experience and education.

John spoke about the natural formation of his friend groups growing up, demonstrating that, in his case, the friendships he formed with his Mexican peers were particularly essential to his conceptions of identity: "You know, when it came to making friends, for some reason, it was always the Mexican kids that gravitated towards me, usually sought me out. And the white kids, for whatever reason, I didn't really click with. Like, I can remember, um, middle school, uh, I went to a very predominantly Hispanic middle school, and even just on the first day of sixth grade when I didn't know anybody, I just remember a couple [sic] Mexican kids just saying, 'Hey, come over here and sit with us.' I don't know if they realized that I belonged with them, but I never had white kids call me over like that." John's final comment is striking for its confusion over what

belonging to this friend group meant; because he is biracial, he perceived his membership to be somehow deceptive. Ironically, one might describe John as “the other” in this situation as the dominant cultural groups at his school were Mexican and Mexican-American students; as a mixed individual, John seems to believe he was an outsider by default due to his whiteness.

Similarly, Dana recounted experiences wherein she was questioned about her identity by people in disbelief over her racial makeup. She explained that “...in high school I always got being white, and like, I distinctly remember, like, um, when we’d get a sub [sic] and like calling role, them being like, ‘Are you sure...you’re, you’re Dana *Rosales*?’ Like getting asked that, like, ‘Are you sure you’re *the* Rosales?’” Although it is not explicitly stated, one could assume Dana was singled out due to physical characteristics such as skin color and manner of speaking, which for biracial individuals especially do not always match the dominant perceptions of what a certain race or cultural group is and should be. Kristen, another graduate student, shared a childhood anecdote that exemplifies this sentiment, though imbued with more explicit prejudice:

So there’s Bastrop, the town, which is where I went to school, but then it’s very rural, and I was just in a very far-flung part of Bastrop County where there’s just like, you know, nothing basically. And this little girl was on the bus with me, um, this white girl—blond girl—I mean it was extremely, and I’m sure it’s still a very extremely racist place and she, in all earnestness—poor little thing, it’s not her fault, you know, she honestly, uh—one day as we were about to be dropped off at our bus stop, towards the end of the line, she said ‘Hey, Kristen,’ she was like, ‘did you notice,

like we're, like some of the last people on the bus.' She's like 'There's no more niggers or Mexicans on the bus anymore.' And I was like 'Okay.' And I told my mom as soon as she picked me up and she just got so furious, you know. She actually rolled the window down and she saw that little girl, and she's like 'Who was it that told you that?' And just straight up was like 'Hey! Guess what your friend is? Your friend Kristen'—like basically, like, put me in her face—like, 'This is a Mexican!'

Thus, in Kristen's case, the persistence of racist attitudes in the town where she grew up made the process of understanding and shaping identity problematic, as she was likely to encounter bigots—albeit impressionable ones like this young girl—who would express prejudice views. Moments like this are disturbing, to be sure, but possibly more so when they occur among adults in professional places of work.

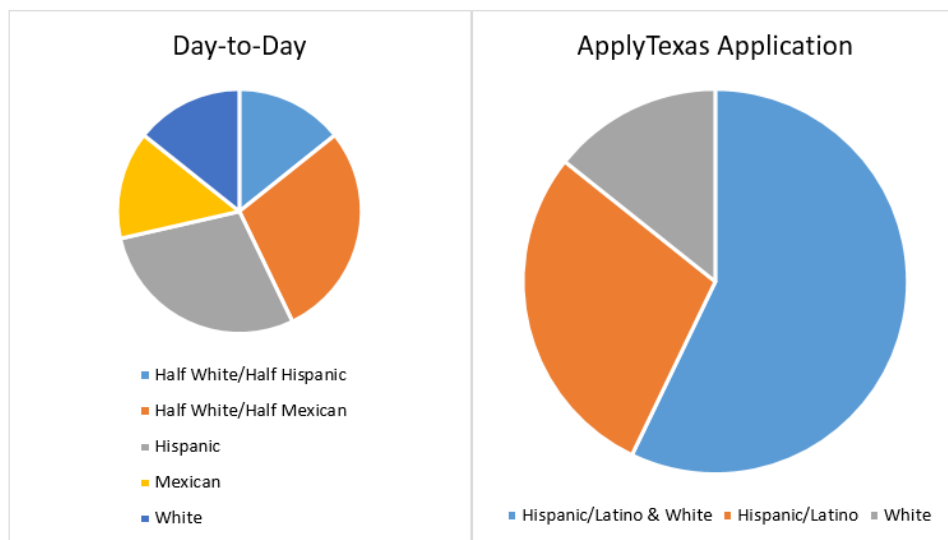
Melissa, another graduate student, spoke openly about her frustration at being racially misidentified by others: "Um, overall, I mean there's been times where it's been a point of anger, I guess. Like, um, my last position, when we were replacing—hiring my replacement—[I remember] one of the committee members saying, 'Oh, well, we need more diversity in the office,' and I said, 'Well, what do you mean, we need more diversity?' And he said, 'Well, everybody here is white,' and I was like, 'Well, but, I'm half, and besides being a veteran and everything else.' But he was like, 'Oh, well no—we need somebody who looks the part.'" One can understand Melissa's frustration, given the circumstances. However, it is worth pointing out that she chooses to self-identify as White with family and peers. Thus, it would seem that, while she herself prefers to

identify as White, she does not appreciate the assumptions people make about her; for her, maintaining agency is important for both public and self-perception.

As a whole, most of the participants expressed this desire. They all wish to craft and perform identity independently, and feel frustrated or confused when they encounter stereotypes or others wrongfully assign them an identity they do not recognize as their own, a feeling comparable to what many feel when self-identifying on documentation, as these final sections demonstrate.

#### *Quantifying Identity: Document-Based Identification*

Key to this study was understanding how individuals assert and express their identity on a day-to-day basis, but more importantly, determining if and how documents which solicit individuals' race and ethnicity like the ApplyTexas application impact their response. Accordingly, the data yields interesting results. As previously discussed, when self-identifying among family and peers 3/7 total participants choose to identify as biracial (see fig. 1).



**Figure 1. Participants Overall: Day-to-Day versus ApplyTexas Application Self-Identification**



Interestingly, however, while all undergraduate participants identify as biracial among peers, only 2/3 chose to represent their mixed heritage and identified as Hispanic/Latino and White on the ApplyTexas application, while the remaining participant chose to identify as solely Hispanic/Latino (see table 2).

**Table 2. Undergraduate Students: Day-to-Day versus ApplyTexas Application Self-Identification**

Undergraduate Students		
	Day-to-Day	ApplyTexas Application
Amelia	Half White/Half Hispanic	Hispanic/Latino & White
Samantha	Half White/Half Mexican	Hispanic/Latino & White
Shane	Half White/Half Mexican	Hispanic/Latino

As the applicants explained, this disparity may depend on the context of the application itself. For instance, Shane expressed reservation over the question: “I thought it was a little strange how they singled, um, they singled out Hispanic and Latino. I didn’t know if, like, if there was something special with it or what exactly it was. And then they have all the other races. So, I thought that was a little off, but I still went with Hispanic” (see fig. 2).

7. Ethnicity and Race:  
Are you Hispanic or Latino? (a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race)

☐ Yes ☐ No

Please select the racial category or categories with which you most closely identify. Check as many as apply.

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native

☐ Asian

☐ Black or African American

☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

☐ White

**Figure 2. ApplyTexas Application**

Samantha's comments were similar, though with more concern over representing her biracial heritage: "I wondered like if I should click White, I guess, because I mean, like Hispanic, [sic] like, I don't know because when I look at this stuff, like Cuban, Mexican, all this, I don't see, like...I don't know how you would define Hispanic, like or define...[sic] I don't see half-White and Mexican right there, so I just, I mean I guess I just like, I put Hispanic, but I'm also White, so you know, just so they know."

Graduate students fared similarly during the application process, though with some variation. Although half self-identify as Hispanic among peers, none identified this way on their application. Three chose to represent their biracial identity on their application, answering "yes," they are "Hispanic or Latino," and selecting "White" for their racial category, while one chose to just identify as White (see table 3).

**Table 3. Graduate Students: Day-to-Day versus ApplyTexas Application Self-Identification**

<b>Graduate Students</b>		
	Day-to-Day	ApplyTexas Application
Dana	Hispanic	Hispanic/Latino & White
John	Hispanic	Hispanic/Latino
Kristen	Mexican	Hispanic/Latino & White
Melissa	White	White

However, as with the undergraduates, completing this question is not always an easy feat. As applicants like Dana suggest, the task can even induce anxiety: "Yeah, so I'll just try to like read it over all the way, completely, to make sure that I'm choosing the right one. So mostly just kind of a little anxiety over choosing the wrong one somehow. [I have to negotiate] what situation they've put me in. Like what context they've put me in." Here, Dana admits hesitation; she cannot classify her identity with ease. Instead, she must carefully read through the entire document, consider her options, and finally make

her selections, despite whatever misgivings remain.

John explained that he is more hesitant to disclose his biracial identity, as he normally identifies as just Hispanic: “I check the Hispanic box no matter what, you know, because of my surname, but there is a little part of me that goes, well wait, ‘Shouldn’t you check the White box too? You’re just gonna [sic] deny that side?’ And I’m like ‘Yeah, okay, I’ll deny it.’” However, he goes on to explain why he chose White as his race: “I would guess I did put White, just because it seems like...it’s almost like they’re sayin’ [sic]...when I read it, to me that must include Hispanics because they’re not American Indian, and they’re not Alaskan, they’re not Asian, they’re not Black, and they’re not Hawaiian so, you have to check...as a Hispanic, White is the only option, really.” Melissa, who self-identifies as White both with peers and on documents like the ApplyTexas application, implied that she defines her identity independently of documents, yet still harbors confusion:

I never know what to put. I always have leaned towards putting more White than I guess acknowledging, I guess, the other half of my background [sic] I just never did. Besides that, people just assume that by looking at you and your last name, ‘Oh, there you go: White. Carry on.’ [...] Maybe one of the reasons I’ve always said no [to being Hispanic or Latino] is because, yes, my parents are...you know, my mother was Hispanic, but does that mean, just because I grew up with sort of that culture, I get to claim that? I mean, it’s confusing. [...] I’ve always said just White. And I’ve always said no [for Hispanic or Latino].

With less emphasis on the document itself, Melissa’s concerns converge mostly around

what she perceives to be cultural appropriation. More to the point, for her, cultural distinctions not only concern her immediate heritage, but also her parents' in that she realizes there may be inherent differences between each of their experiences and their right to claim Hispanic or Latino identity versus her own, yet another interesting perspective on the nature of identity and its meaning in different contexts. In the final section, I further elucidate applicants' efforts to reconcile identity, with an eye toward possible changes to make this process easier and these documents more sensible.

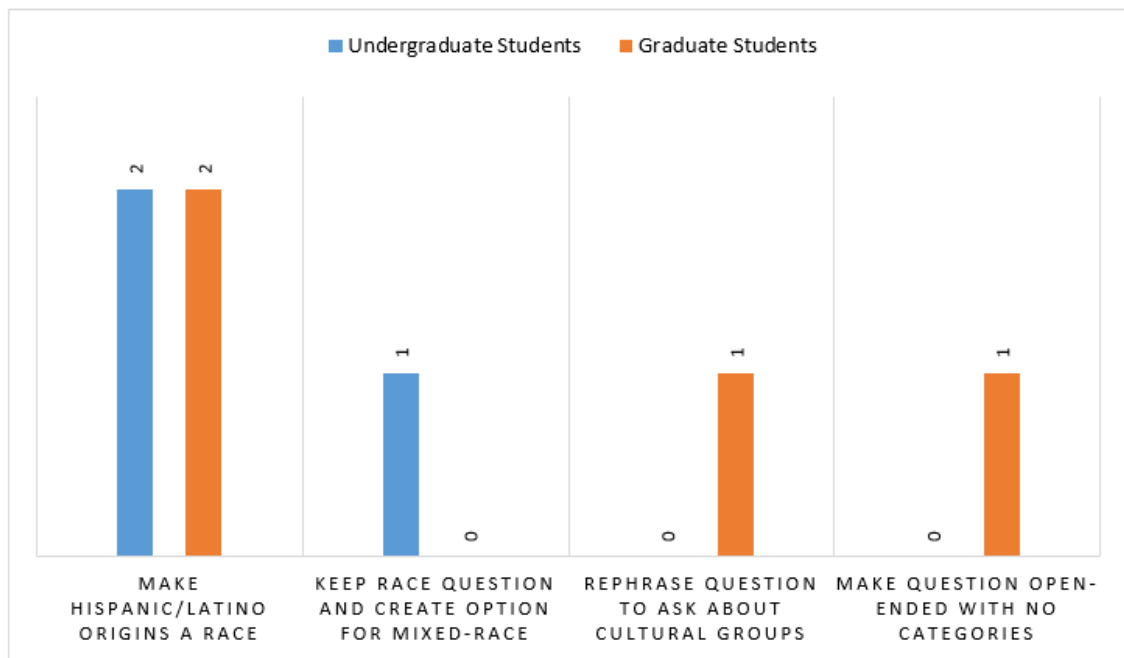
*Reclaiming Identity: Document Design of the ApplyTexas Application*

Both the undergraduate and graduate participants expressed unanimous confusion over the ApplyTexas' choice to separate Hispanic and Latino identity from the other available racial categories, and thus, did not agree with the two-question format. Among the undergraduates, two students suggested combining the questions into one, so that Hispanic and Latino identity would be included as a racial category. The remaining undergraduate argued the same, but also recommended creating a sub-question which would allow mixed-race individuals to define their identity more clearly, citing a rise in the number of biracial and multiracial individuals as justification (see table 4).

**Table 4. Undergraduate Students: Proposed Changes to ApplyTexas Application's Race/Ethnicity Question**

Undergraduate Students				
	Make Hispanic/Latino origins a race	Keep race question and create option for mixed-race	Rephrase question to ask about cultural groups	Make question open-ended with no categories
Amelia	—	X	—	—
Samantha	X	—	—	—
Shane	X	—	—	—

The graduate students offered similar, yet varied suggestions for revising the questions (see fig. 3).



**Figure 3. Proposed Changes to ApplyTexas Application’s Race/Ethnicity Question**

Like the majority of undergraduates, the graduate students supported collapsing Hispanic and Latino identity in with the existing racial categories to create one question as illustrated in Melissa’s comments:

I think with this number seven question, is it saying that Hispanic or Latino is not a race because it’s not an option? So if you hit yes, then you still have to select which one? Or it’s making it look like, even if you hit yes, you need to put a check mark in one of the boxes, but none of those boxes reflect the top one. [Right.] So if you hit yes, do you have to say, “Oh, well, but I’m white”? Or do you hit yes, “but I’m half something else?” But if you’re one hundred percent Hispanic... [...] But it says “Please select.” So it’s prompting you to select. Like it’s kind of

necessary.

Still, the two remaining graduate students proposed alternative solutions for revision (see table 5). One recommended stripping the questions of the phrases “race” and “ethnicity,” and simply asking applicants to select which “cultural group or groups” they most closely identify with, but acknowledged possible issues with this solution.

**Table 5. Graduate Students: Proposed Changes to ApplyTexas Application’s Race/Ethnicity Question**

Graduate Students				
	Make Hispanic/Latino origins a race	Keep race question and create option for mixed-race	Rephrase question to ask about cultural groups	Make question open-ended with no categories
Dana	X	–	–	–
John	–	–	X	–
Kristen	–	–	–	X
Melissa	X	–	–	–

Overall, a common reaction to the application for both undergraduate and graduate students was confusion, namely surrounding its distinction between race and ethnicity. For instance, John recommended this: “I would maybe phrase it not as a question of ethnicity versus race, but maybe just which—and there might be problems with this—which cultural group, you know, something along those lines, do you identify with most, and have people check that box, but then of course, you could have, I don’t know, people who aren’t Asian at all—‘But oh, all my friends are Asian, so I’m gonna [sic] check Asian,’—so that could be a problem. But I don’t know why...yeah, I guess I just don’t understand the needing to have a distinction between ethnicity and race.” Because terms like “race” and “ethnicity” are used but not defined—their definitions merely implied—John’s suggestion to remove them completely is an attempt to resolve that confusion. Yet, he acknowledges the probable issues that belie this proposed

revision. Although one can assume that most people would identify based on cultural heritage and background, one cannot ignore the possibility that they would be tempted to make racial selections based on more subjective factors such as identification with close friends or assimilation into other peer groups.

Finally, Kristen's objections to the application, while similar to John's, underscored slightly different issues with ApplyTexas's chosen format. Like John, she pointed out the blurry distinctions between race and ethnicity, directly questioning the motivations behind this choice:

First of all, it's not clear if you're supposed to pick both of these options or just one—that's the first thing. I find it strange that—me personally, and I know that there's a schism or different ideas about ethnicity and race—but I don't understand why they are divided, ethnicity and race, the way that they are. And why is Hispanic, umm, why is it only Hispanic that's pulled out of that? [...] I would let people identify however they choose to. I don't understand why they have to be imposing anything whatsoever. I'm sure they have their reasons, but I don't know them, so...

Perhaps the most compelling revelation for technical communicators comes at the end of Kristen's comments. She acknowledges the fact that she does not know why the designers of the application chose these specific distinctions and categories. Rather, she resigns her trust in their judgement and expertise: "I'm sure they have their reasons, but I don't know them, so..." Thus, it is Kristen, the applicant—the rhetorical receiver of the document—who must grapple with the questions' limited context, a dilemma we will explore yet further.

## **Mini Focus Groups**

While the one-on-one interviews sought to gain more personal insights about identity expression in different contexts, the focus groups placed more emphasis on racial reporting on forms themselves, which included the 2010 U.S. Census, Common Application, and ApplyTexas application. As a result, the questions and discussion revolved more around issues of usability, namely the rhetorical framing—both linguistically and visually—of race in each form. This section catalogues the findings from those discussions based on the following: 1) whether participants' racial classifications were consistent from form to form; 2) which form was the easiest to complete and why; 3) which form was the most difficult to complete and why; 4) how they responded to the language each form used to define race; and finally, 5) what their ideal question for racial classification would look like. Because the focus groups examined multiple forms, these findings present both distinct and comparative results.

### *Consistent Racial Classifications*

To help frame the conversation, each focus group began with a question regarding how race is generally presented in documentation, a question posed in all the one-on-one interviews. Both the undergraduate and graduate participants said confusion was their main response to most questions about race and ethnicity, a helpful segue for thinking about the immediate forms under scrutiny, which participants reviewed and completed during the session.

When asked whether their racial classifications were consistent across all forms, both the undergraduates' and graduates' verbal and written responses show that, in general, they responded identically in each form based on their personal conceptions of



identity. In terms of representing their mixed identity, 5/7 participants recorded both their Hispanic/Latnix and White heritage according to the forms' options—a majority both within each group and across participant lines—though with slight variation; specifically, 4/7 applicants responded identically across all forms (see table 6). Conversely, of the remaining two outliers, one chose to record her Hispanic/Latinx heritage, but not her White heritage (as her race), while the other chose to record her White heritage, but not her Hispanic/Latinx heritage.

**Table 6. Responses across Sample Forms**

<b>Undergraduate Students</b>			
	2010 U.S. Census form	Common Application	ApplyTexas application
Amelia	Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin ("Spaniard") & White	Yes, Hispanic/Latino & White	Yes, Hispanic/Latino & White
Samantha	Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano	Yes, Hispanic/Latino	Yes, Hispanic/Latino
Shane	Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano & White	Yes, Hispanic/Latino & White	Yes, Hispanic/Latino & White
<b>Graduate Students</b>			
	2010 U.S. Census form	Common Application	ApplyTexas application
Dana	Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano & White	Yes, Hispanic/Latino & White	Yes, Hispanic/Latino & White
Daniel	Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano & White	Yes, Hispanic/Latino & White	Yes, Hispanic/Latino & White
John	Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano & White	Yes, Hispanic/Latino & White	Yes, Hispanic/Latino & White
Melissa	White	White	White

### *Disparate Responses between One-on-One Interviews and Focus Groups/Methods*

As previously established, most participants responded consistently across all form. However, interestingly, 3/7 participants reported different racial selections in their one-on-one interviews versus those recorded in the focus groups; it should be noted that the disparity exists only for their responses to the race question on the ApplyTexas application, for this was the only form discussed in both the one-on-one interviews and focus groups. In particular, 2/3 undergraduate participants and 1/4 graduate participants chose differently. A number of factors could have contributed to this. For one, they may have been influenced by the focus groups' communal dynamic. Or, perhaps they were influenced the different forms' varying formats. Or, perhaps they felt the need to be consistent across all forms, and because biracial White/Latinx identity is the central focus, they wanted to represent this identity in the session when open discussion took place about these issues. Whatever the case, these differences are noteworthy and should be taken into account.

### *Easiest and Most Accommodating*

While most participants consistently represented their racial identity across the three forms, all participants found that the 2010 U.S. Census form was the easiest to complete—a unanimous majority—citing that it was “more specific” with “more choices” (see fig. 4). When asked to elaborate, undergraduate Shane claimed that the question on the census form was easier to complete because it has “three or four different options for ‘Yes’ and one option for ‘No’” in response to Hispanic or Latino origins, thus, making it explicitly clear how to respond. Undergraduate Samantha confirmed Shane’s observation, explaining that she “liked that if you’re not one of those [pre-

determined classifications], they have a box where you can put what you actually are.”

→ **NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 8 about Hispanic origin and Question 9 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.**

**8. Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?**

☐ No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin

☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano

☐ Yes, Puerto Rican

☐ Yes, Cuban

☐ Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin — *Print origin, for example, Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on.* ↗

**9. What is Person 1's race? Mark ☒ one or more boxes.**

☐ White

☐ Black, African Am., or Negro

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.* ↗

<input type="checkbox"/> Asian Indian	<input type="checkbox"/> Japanese	<input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian
<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/> Korean	<input type="checkbox"/> Guamanian or Chamorro
<input type="checkbox"/> Filipino	<input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese	<input type="checkbox"/> Samoan
<input type="checkbox"/> Other Asian — <i>Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.</i> ↗	<input type="checkbox"/> Other Pacific Islander — <i>Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.</i> ↗	

☐ Some other race — *Print race.* ↗

**Figure 4. 2010 U.S. Census Form**

Graduate participants felt similarly. Participant John stated that the census form was more “inclusive,” and preferred its format to the Common Application and ApplyTexas’s bare format. However, while all participants favored the census’s format, graduate student Melissa admitted she was still confused by the form:

You had more choices, but it was still confusing for me, personally. I mean, when it says origin, like, what does that mean? Are you talking about my parents? Are you talking about my grandparents? Are you talking...I mean how far back? Or about just me? Because I was born in Kansas, you know, and I was in foster care, so I know I'm half—I know. But what exactly? I think they're from Mexico, but I couldn't put my life on it. On a form, you know. I guess I could do a DNA test or something.

Given her unique situation and confusion over the term “origin,” Melissa still finds the question problematic when generational concerns and solid knowledge of family history are taken into account, opening up the discussion to the value of such factors outside the immediate concerns of the form.

#### *Most Difficult and Least Accommodating*

Although a unanimous majority found the census form easiest to complete—and thus, the most successful of the three—there was less agreement about which was the most difficult. Of the undergraduates, 2/3 found that the Common Application was the most difficult to complete; alternatively, it was harder for the graduates to reach an agreement. Participant John explained that, “The other two—[the Common Application and ApplyTexas application]—seem the same to me,” which elicited confirmation from the other participants. After brief deliberation, they concluded that although the applications were similar, they took issue with the question regarding race on the Common Application (see fig. 5), preferring ApplyTexas's phrasing:

**Daniel:** I also didn't like that on the second one, the Common Application, it says, like, ‘Regardless of your answer to the prior

question...' It's like...

**Melissa:** 'It doesn't matter!'

**Group:** Yeah.

**John:** Oh, yeah. That's a good point.

**Daniel:** I did not like that.

**Profile** [Preview](#)

- ▶ Personal Information
- ▶ Address
- ▶ Contact Details
- ▼ **Demographics**

Religious preference

U.S. Armed forces status

Are you Hispanic or Latino?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No  
[Clear](#)

**Regardless of your answer to the prior question, please indicate how you identify yourself. (Select one or more)**

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- ☐ White

The questions in this section, while helpful to colleges, are entirely optional, and you're welcome to move on without answering them. Before you do, please confirm for us that you've completed this section to your satisfaction. \*

☐ Yes, I have completed this section to my satisfaction.

[Back](#) [Continue](#)

**Instructions and Help** [↗](#)

**Ethnicity**  
The ethnicity question on the Common Application has been updated to meet the Department of Education reporting requirements. Answers to the ethnicity question are not required for submission. If you choose to answer this question, you may provide whatever answer you feel best applies to you or any groups of which you feel you are a part. You can answer all or none of the questions. If you wish to answer the ethnicity question but feel that the established categories do not fully capture how you identify yourself, you may provide more detail in the Additional Information section of the application. [ - ]  
[\[more\]](#) [↗](#)

**Figure 5. Common Application**

Consequently, the participants felt that this cautionary note devalued Hispanic and Latinx heritage, which incited visible frustration and confusion over the two-question format common across all the forms.

Relatedly, the participants preferred the ApplyTexas application to the Common Application because, like the census form, ApplyTexas specifies multiple cultural groups. Again, John explained, “I like...that they’re giving the different options—Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican...—so I like that, whereas the second one, the Common App, didn’t do that. It was just Hispanic or Latino.” Undergraduate Shane expressed similar feelings, claiming that the question is too vague, and that “...there’s a lot more that’s considered Hispanic or Latino” than what these labels imply. Both undergraduate and graduate participants voiced similar concern over certain terms and phrases used in the forms, which varied in both wording and usage, and which are discussed further in the next section.

### *Problematic Language*

To be sure, the inconsistent usage of both identical and similar racial categories and choices across the different forms drew pause from all participants. However, another aspect that participants focused on were the notes meant to provide additional information or clarification for each question, namely in the census form and Common Application. First, participants in both the undergraduate and graduate focus groups were alarmed by the census form’s note about Hispanic origin: “NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 8 about Hispanic origin and Question 9 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.” Undergraduates Shane and Samantha expressed explicit reservations:

**Shane:** On the census...when I was filling it out, I noticed that they have a note right above [the questions] that says, “Please answer both Question 8 about Hispanic origin and Question 9 about race. For the census, Hispanic origins are not races.” And for me, that was kind of like weird to think about because they why would it matter? If it’s not a race, then, like, that’s going to be the next question? I mean, like, why, like, why would that origin matter anymore than, like, my white origin of being like Irish or yada yada?

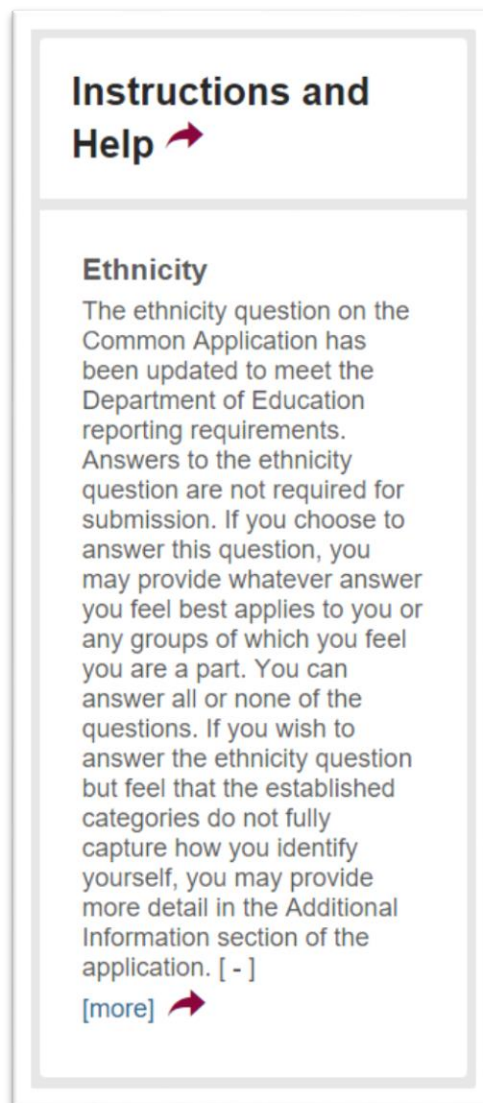
**Samantha:** Yeah, it’s just confusing. Cus [sic], I mean, I would put for the first question, Yes, Mexican, Mexican American, and I guess if you have to answer [Question 9], I would put White? Like, I guess? You know, I wouldn’t know what to put because I feel like Mexican American kind of answers that. I don’t know. I think that’s weird.

As these comments illustrate, confusion abounds over the inherent meaning and implications behind select terms, namely as specific cultural groups are concerned. For Shane, singling out Hispanic origins seems odd, given that implicit in the term White are other origins, as with other racial categories. In Samantha’s case, the issue lies in what classifications like “Mexican American” actually mean; for her, “American” means “White,” so therefore, “Mexican American” most accurately describes her because she has chosen to collapse White identity in with her sense of American identity.

The graduate participants shared similar sentiments about the census’s note. In a moment of confusion, John bluntly asked, “And why is it not a race? Like, do I not know what a race is, then? I don’t know.” After further consideration, he offered additional

explanation: “Or nationalities, not races? But then I don’t know...I mean, if you’re Thai, you’re from Thailand, so that’s your nationality. Why is it that if you’re from Nicaragua, that’s not your race? Or is it? I don’t know.” To which Dana simply responded, “It’s all pretty confusing.” For both undergraduate and graduate participants, Hispanic and Latinx origins seemed at once vague and contradictory.

Participants also debated over the Common Application’s extended note on ethnicity, which applicants have to click on and extend to read it in its entirety (see fig.6).



**Figure 6. Common Application’s Note on Ethnicity**



Graduate students Melissa and Dana expressed particular aversion to the note:

**Melissa:** ‘You may provide additional information...’ which is not anywhere near these questions? I mean, maybe it’s [sic] later on? So you’re just going to have to throw that in later on? Like, ‘Oh, yeah. By the way, I don’t identify with any of these, but please let me get into college?’

**Dana:** And it kind of makes your, like, awkwardness of not fitting into one nice category, like, stand out even more. Like, I’ve got to explain this in the Additional Information section, like, if I want to? Or you’re just gonna [sic] have to give in and choose one of their categories?

Melissa specifically points out the inconvenience of navigating to a different part of the application to provide additional details about racial and ethnic identity. Her comment also insinuates that this information should not matter, but nonetheless recognizes its potential importance for acceptance into college, given her knowledge about affirmative action policy. Dana’s response confirms Melissa’s frustrations, but with more emphasis on the note’s overt underscoring of its limiting options; instead of a helpful admission, the note actually works to amplify Dana’s concerns over not conforming to the available categories. Consequently, it has the opposite effect of its intended purpose.

While the undergraduates did not openly discuss this note, their annotations on the printed copies of the form indicate that they read and considered the note, all the same. On his copy of the form, Shane wrote, “I think this is how these questions should always be handled.” Samantha protracted this sentiment in her annotations: “I like this, for others who don’t fully apply [sic] to one race they have the choice to pick what makes them feel comfortable.” Based on these responses, it seems the undergraduates perceived

the form's acknowledgement of its limitations as a strength, whereas the graduate students saw it as a weakness.

### *Ideal Question*

As discussed, confusing and vague language was decidedly crucial for why participants took issue with the forms, overall. However, in the end, they found the two-question format most problematic; for them, this separation is the root cause of their frustration when responding to questions like this; virtually all participants commented on this aspect of the forms' questions about race during the course of the discussion.

Not surprisingly, when proposing alternative options, most undergraduates and graduates said their ideal revision would eliminate the separate question about Hispanic and Latino origin, and simply collapse it in with the question about race and add an additional category for Hispanic or Latino. Undergraduate Amelia elaborated on this strategy, suggesting that instead of just Hispanic or Latino, the question could provide a parenthetical with suggested cultural groups or even include these as specific options respondents could choose from.

Graduate participants supported a similar revision, but with a slightly different solution. John recommended adding an option labeled "Mixed," admitting that he would feel better because he could check "White" and feel better about how he was representing himself because he could acknowledge both his White and Latinx heritage, and those reviewing his application would know with certainty that he is biracial; for John, if he is to represent both sides of his background, it is essential that there be clearer ways to communicate this, so that these choices are explicit, not merely implied.

In any case, when asked to devise their ideal question, participants unanimously

supported a single question which included Hispanic and Latinx origins as a racial category, demonstrating that, despite their personal feelings of race and identity, individuals should be able to clearly choose this option for themselves. In his closing remarks, Josh concluded, “My Hispanic heritage does feel like a race to me. Not a nationality because nationalities mean from a specific country. Um, yeah, I mean, I think it should be considered as a race.”

## **V. DISCUSSION**

From these findings certain conclusions are immediately clear. Chiefly, they suggest a unanimous resistance to current iterations of race-based questions on all the forms examined—albeit motivated by various factors—including the ApplyTexas application. In addition to general confusion over the two-question format, and, therefore, the deliberate separation of Hispanic and Latinx origins from racial categories, participants also found the questions to be equally confusing in their phrasing and word choice. Thus, while the current configuration generates confusion for most Hispanics and Latinxs (Pimentel & Balzhiser, 2012), as this study shows, biracial White/Latinx individuals also find it unaccommodating for reasons herein discussed further.

To thoroughly understand the grievances that emerged, it is helpful to first analyze the findings based on the goals of the study: to assess the how characterizations of race and ethnicity on forms affect mixed White/Latinxs' racial reporting patterns and whether these forms effectively accommodate racial classification. Beyond these local concerns, I also discuss the broader implications the findings pose for biracial identity and its portrayal in documentation.

### **Limitations**

Because this study's findings emerged from one-on-one interviews and focus groups with a small number of participants overall, the conclusions drawn should not stand as definitive representations of all opinions surrounding these issues—not for mixed White/Latinx students, Latinx students, or others. The findings and related discussion simply represent a snapshot of the particular opinions of students at a public Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in Texas with distinct characteristics which may be

comparable to other colleges and universities with similar profiles. Thus, certain limitations must be taken into account.

To begin, I must acknowledge the inherent power imbalance that drives studies of this nature, which rely on the relationship between researcher and participant. Given this imbalance, it is possible that participants may have limited what they shared in our conversations for the sake of privacy; on the other hand, the opposite is also possible: they may have felt pressured to dramatize their responses to make their participation, opinions, and experiences feel more significant and essential to the aims of the study.

To mitigate these potential scenarios, I tried to create a space in which participants felt comfortable to speak openly and freely; although not originally part of my approach, after interviewing my first undergraduate participant, Shane, I felt compelled to begin each conversation thereafter by explaining to participants that they were free to share as much or as little as they wanted, and that whatever their responses, they were valuable to my study. While it is my belief that participants' responses were authentically their own, I cannot ignore the influence my position afforded me in the contexts of these interactions, which were not natural but contrived conversations.

Relatedly, some may perceive my own biracial White/Latinx racial identity as both helpful and problematic. In particular, my background may have allowed participants to feel they could speak more openly about these issues, while at the same time unknowingly influencing them. It would be reasonable to validate my status as a theoretical "equal," but it is essential to acknowledge that my perceptions about race and ethnicity are shaped by my own experiences and background, a fact which cannot be overlooked. However, the aim of this study was not to influence or craft a particular

consensus, but merely attempt to gather one.

Moreover, with such a small participant pool, conclusions about the findings' meaning in relationship to a larger population can only be inferred, not confirmed. A revised study would solicit more participants for a larger pool of responses and data over a longer period of time. Specifically, it is unclear how much responses would have varied, but recruiting participants from other departments at the university might have yielded a richer knowledgebase.

Further, while both the interview and focus group questions generally felt well-ordered, moving the conversations smoothly from broad to narrow concerns, it is possible that there were missed opportunities to address issues not yet explored in existent research on race and ethnicity-based questions, namely as digital mediums are concerned. For, unlike the census form and other paper-based documents, many college applications are accessed online, which may impact applicants' overall experience when completing them; depending on the aims of the institution sponsoring the form, certain digital features may be essential in their design efforts for facilitating the completion process. In this way, then, online forms present new challenges and questions about *functional* rhetoric. For this reason, the ApplyTexas application poses interesting accessibility and usability concerns that warrant attention. As such, this study lacks a thorough investigation into the ApplyTexas application's digital nature, which may be essential to this conversation, thus warranting more thorough study in the future.

Finally, it should be noted that because this study simulated the process of reviewing and completing the ApplyTexas application, participants' opinions may not mirror how they felt when they originally completed it. While it is feasible to assume that

their responses for the study were consistent with their original responses, it is possible that the questions and concerns raised during the course of the study may have generated different answers.

However, despite these limitations and possible outcomes, one must consider the role this study plays in the larger network of research being conducted and published about these and related issues. What makes it unique, and thus, valuable, is its assessment of forms like the ApplyTexas application, which have yet to be thoroughly studied in a meaningful way.

### **Constructing and Contextualizing Bicultural Identity**

Because this study was designed to gain insight into how forms themselves influence racial classification, it was important to understand how they choose to express their identity in everyday contexts, which involve interactions with family, peers, and others, all of which are informed by one's personal development and societal norms. Accordingly, the following discussion points compare and contrast participants' biracial orientation in day-to-day and formal contexts to further understand the rationale behind their classifications.

A central difference between racial classifications in forms versus day-to-day contexts is the fact that college applications represent what L'Heureux Lewis and Bell (2006) call situations of encounter, for these are some of the first documents students will confront with real stakes tied to racial identification. L'Heureux Lewis and Bell argue that, "Discussing topics in which race is a factor, such as affirmative action or discrimination, may be strongly influenced by situation of encounter," a central line of inquiry for this study (p. 261). In fact, more than previous questions they may have

responded to for standardized testing and otherwise, many will not have completed a census form, thus, making the emphasis on college applications all the more vital.

In this study, the majority of participants chose to represent their mixed racial heritage in their applications, a finding that is consistent with previous studies interested in mixed racial reporting (Miyawaki, 2015). Moreover, this general outcome is also consistent with Torres et al.'s study (2003) regarding identity formation and bicultural orientation, which found that Latinx students "exhibited high levels of acculturation and were placed in either the Bicultural or Anglo Orientation quadrants," validating "the contention that one can acculturate to the majority culture and still maintain pride in the culture of origin," (p. 167). This correlation is interesting to consider in relation to my study, which solely involved offspring of White/Latinx marriages. However, a possible key difference between these correlations relates to the actual participants and their respective motivations because critical to understanding White/Latinx identity is the degree to which whiteness shapes one's sense of self.

In particular, while the non-White Latinx participants in Torres's study expressed a more bicultural orientation due to factors like acculturation and assimilation, the participants in my study exhibit less creative license; their desire to represent their White and Latinx background in both day-to-day and formal contexts is less a choice than it is a necessity due to their hybrid racial backgrounds, a rationale which confirms Moreman's findings (2011) which found that White/Latinx participants generally perform identity within the greater bifurcated racial paradigm, unable to fully cultivate a true hybrid self from their separate racialized selves.

This point of contention was commonly discussed in the one-on-one interviews.



In our one-on-one interview, undergraduate student Samantha claimed on more than one occasion that she felt obligated to represent both sides of her heritage, “just so they know”—“they” being the ones reviewing the forms. Imbedded in comments like this is the idea that racial accountability and policing is and should be enforced; while this may not be the case for everyone, for individuals like Samantha, identity and duty are one and the same. This relationship between authenticity and Latinx cultural pride accurately describes similar motives driving individuals like graduate student John, who embraces his biracial identity and would like to accurately represent it on his college applications, yet maintains a deeper connection to his Latinx heritage, derived from his San Antonio roots.

However, for participants like graduate student Melissa who choose not to identify as biracial in neither day-to-day nor formal contexts, other factors may be at play. For Melissa, honesty—or a constructed view of honesty and authenticity in the context of race—is essential to her conception of identity, especially as it relates to physical appearance. Because she looks White, she finds it difficult to identify as biracial, which in her mind, produces a darker-skinned archetype. Consequently, she feels pressured by social norms to say she is White, whether she actually agrees with this identification or not. Because conceptions of race are based in part on physical characteristics, namely skin color, one can understand Melissa’s desire to rationalize—or racialize—this way. Nevertheless, because the participants in my study are all biracial, one can understand the pressure many feel to acknowledge both sides of their heritage in both day-to-day and formal contexts.

## **Rhetorical Representations of Race in Documentation**

A major value of this study was its focus on the language and design strategies employed in college application forms. In the past, research about mixed-race identification in college applications has tended to focus more on the experience and process of identity formation and less so—or not at all—on how questions are designed, worded, and presented. Consequently, the knowledge we have about these questions’ rhetorical significance has largely emerged from surveys of the census form; yet, while the census form does serve as a helpful exemplar for thinking about the ApplyTexas application, from a technical communication standpoint, the purpose and target audiences differ between both, which may impact individuals’ responses. Ultimately, these differences affect both the process of producing and perceiving meaning.

Most individuals encounter questions that request information about one’s racial and ethnic background with predetermined identities crafted from familial upbringing and social interactions. However, the language used to classify race and ethnicity in documentation does not always match their way of thinking about or communicating race, which this study strategically sought to investigate.

While participants commented on several aspects of the questions’ phrasing and design, the notes in the census form and Common Application drew considerable attention from both the undergraduate and graduate students. Two possible strategies in the methods employed may have helped to draw out these responses. For one, built into the focus group sessions was a question specifically addressing the forms’ rhetorical features: “How do you feel about the language used in these forms? Is it clear or confusing? Why?” While open-ended, one could argue that the question creates narrow

terms by which to read the forms, thus inviting superficial responses. However, it was my hope that through further conversation, participants would offer more nuanced explanations for the phrases and terms worthy of discussion, which they did.

For instance, after rereading the census form's note a few times, graduate student John<sup>2</sup> pushed for answers, asking why Hispanic and Latinx origins are not a race, and more importantly, did he correctly understand the concept of race, to which the other participants responded similarly. This general consensus raises interesting questions about race and its seemingly transformative nature. John's comment speaks to the idea that, as a concept, what race is and means is ever-changing, its meaning continuously being deconstructed and redefined. Individuals in John's position at once know themselves and don't. Thus, given these forms' use of multivariate language in defining, framing, and to large degree, confusing race, they have the potential to force unintended meaning onto terms that individuals must use to craft rhetorical identity, a finding confirmed by Miyawaki (2015); it seems problematic, then, that these forms make individuals question their identity when their purpose is to gather reliable data about identity.

As a social imperative that largely dictates how we interact with one another, both intra- and cross-culturally, it is interesting to think about the concrete influence such an unstable concept has on society at large. Rhetorically, contemporary America seems at odds with its own cultural agenda. While some wish to dispense with racial and ethnic

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<sup>2</sup> During the course of the focus group, John proved to be more vocal about his opinions, often reading terms, phrases, and sentences like the census's note out loud to process their meaning, which produced more candid responses. However, as the moderator, I did not feel he was disruptive or monopolized the conversation, for the other participants were equally forthcoming in their opinions; in many ways, it seemed John's presence made others feel comfortable and empowered to speak more freely.

labels they perceive to be simplistic and unproductive in a “post-racial” America, others rigidly cling to them as necessary buoys, especially where social justice is concerned. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that this etymological tension is partly responsible for the fractured and mediocre rhetorical system we have for effectively communicating race.

Accordingly, John’s comments about the census form’s note elicited similar feedback about the Common Application’s note on ethnicity from graduate students Melissa and Dana, who were particularly bothered by the way the note seems to underscore their inability to adhere to one category. Thus, while the designers of the application may have included the note as an inclusive gesture, Melissa and Dana feel its effects are exactly the opposite—that it negatively amplifies their liminal status. Conversely, participants in the undergraduate focus group did not express this same aversion. Rather, they felt it was helpful and accommodating, which may speak to the undergraduates’ overall openness to fluidity.

Aside from these notes, tangential phrases in the Common Application and ApplyTexas application meant to clarify the separation of Hispanic and Latinx origins from racial categories felt coercive, and thus, made the participants feel like they were being forced into choices they did not completely support. In particular, participants seemed especially concerned with the fact that the choices they specified did not capture their true cultural narrative. In other words, the selections they made—even in cases when they specified both their White and Hispanic/Latinx heritage—did not necessarily communicate to those reviewing the application that they are indeed biracial. Making these selections does not clearly express that they personally recognize each as a race, a sentiment that was both implied in conversation and discussed openly and repeatedly in

the focus groups. Consequently, for the participants, this ambiguity in translation felt unsettling, which speaks to the rhetorical implications of the design work that goes into creating these forms. It is one thing to champion simplicity, but at what cost to clarity and authenticity?

Finally, in addition to confusion about language, when asked about the overall design of the documents, the physical separation of Hispanic and Latinx origins from the dominant racial categories and the use of the word “regardless” to confirm this separation proved to be one of the most problematic aspects of the forms’ design for all participants. Specifically, this physical separation felt powerfully symbolic of how society views Hispanic and Latinx origins in general, and contrasted with their views which recognize them as both racial and ethnic markers.

In the graduate focus group, participant Dana remarked that responding to the first question about Hispanic or Latino origins felt intuitive, but moving to the second part of these questions which requests specific racial classification made her rethink her answer to the first question, which she often does not know how to reconcile. Consequently, this by-product of the two-question format is immediately problematic for many White/Latinx individuals in Dana’s position.

Together, these elements of language and design obstruct clarity and obscure meaning. Just as participants sometimes feel caught in a social crossroads in daily life, these same feelings manifest themselves in rhetorical situations as well. However, the purpose of this study was not only to understand these forms’ successes and challenges, but also to advance possible solutions for revision, which the following section describes further.

## **Recommendations for Enhancement**

Between the interviews and focus groups, most participants supported two main changes. These suggestions mainly serve to clarify the position Hispanic and Latinx origins occupy within the racial spectrum, and include 1) employing a single-question format, and 2) including Hispanic and Latinx origins as a racial category. Moreover, two secondary recommendations were made that specifically seek to make representing biracial identity easier, which involve 3) including cultural groups that correspond with Hispanic and Latinx origins, and 4) including an option for “mixed race.”

### *Primary Recommendations*

From both the one-on-one interviews and focus groups, it is clear that the majority of participants support a single-format question, wherein Hispanic/Latinx origins would be included as a racial category, a finding that is consistent with previous studies examining the census (Miyawaki, 2015; Pimentel & Balzhiser, 2012). Not only would this accommodate individuals’ conceptions of Hispanic and Latinx racial heritage, it would also grant them more agency: they would be free to self-identify on forms as they do in other contexts, therefore, creating a two-way, rather than one-way interaction. From a rhetorical standpoint, this suggests that applicants are not merely receivers of these questions, but makers of their meaning. Thus, while these documents allow individuals to classify race as they please in theory, they grant only so much freedom to do so. As a result, this mutual relationship, while not historically central to most quantitative documentation or question formats, should be examined with more care.

While it is likely that participants have always felt this way about identity, even prior to this study, the design of the questions and conversations that followed may have

helped to streamline their thought processes and opinions about the forms. Thus, although all participants—both undergraduate and graduate students—expressed an overall aversion to the current question format, the degree to which they felt this varied based on multiple factors not wholly within the study’s purview.

For instance, in our one-on-one interview, graduate student John admitted twice during the course of our conversation that he hadn’t really thought about the design of race-related questions before, despite feeling frustrated when tasked with answering them. Thus, while individuals like John generally support devising new strategies and approaches to the design of such questions, their opinions may not necessarily derive from a place of deep, personal conflict. It may be that only in this contrived situation of encounter that more ardent responses emerged, which alludes to another interesting facet of inquiry: to what degree these questions’ generic formats become engendered in society as to produce a normalized perception of certain racial and ethnic groups, especially by those groups. It is a question worth considering, especially in regards to biracial individuals, who at times experience intra-racism within families buttressed by opposing cultural identities, as undergraduate student Amelia shared in her one-on-one interview.

### *Secondary Recommendations*

Aside from these main recommendations, most participants supported the inclusion of cultural groups that correspond with Hispanic or Latinx origins as helpful examples in the single-question format, which participants felt was a positive feature of both the census form and ApplyTexas application. However, this recommendation did not emerge from the one-on-one interviews, but from the focus groups.

While the undergraduate students merely liked their inclusion, the graduate

students felt they were necessary to the creation of an ideal question, thus, demonstrating a firm need for specificity in classifying one's racial identity. Still, it should be noted that this recommendation was put forth first by graduate student John, affirmed by the rest of the focus group, and finally suggested as a necessary feature. To test the validity of this recommendation, a revised study would directly ask participants whether they feel cultural groups should be listed out to minimize bandwagon influence and account for the fact that inherent in racial categories is a collective of different ethnicities and cultures. Nevertheless, one can see why this specificity would be useful for establishing clarity.

Finally, another proposal that emerged out of this study possibly worth adoption—or at the very least, exploration—is the inclusion of an option for “mixed race.” More than the other recommendations, this one addresses not only issues of question format or descriptive terms used to describe specific cultural groups, but biracial classification itself as a distinct identity—one worth deliberately highlighting.

Currently, there are no convenient ways of describing mixed-race people. Dated terms and those currently in use often feel inappropriate or cumbersome—“mulatto,” “mutt,” “halfie,” “mixed-race,” “biracial,” “multiracial,” “multiethnic”—and therefore, leave many feeling unsatisfied. The questions devised for this study did not specifically ask participants to consider these terms, but they did draw out responses related to this idea. In particular, in the one-on-one interviews I posed the question, “Do you feel marginalized as a biracial individual? There are no clear definitions for what you are or how you should identify. How does this make you feel?” In response, graduate student Kristen explained that it was usually only in these situations, college and job applications, that she seriously considered the use of certain terms, and specifically shared that it



“really bothers [her] that there is this confusion about Hispanic and White,” an ambiguity which often produces “some level of dissatisfaction” in communicating her mixed background. Therefore, it seems it would be ideal to develop more inclusive ways of describing mixed race people that do not treat them like an “other” or “in-between” being, especially as White racial identity is concerned, which offers its own set of considerations and implications.

Because this study specifically concerned White racial identity and Latinx identity, it is essential that we properly situate this racial relationship. As whiteness theorists and others argue, and, as society at large has demonstrated time and again, White privilege is an engendered, subconscious practice. Akin to this is the idea that *pure* racial identification is, too. Language, ritual, and community dynamics perpetuate this phenomenon. While I did not specifically press participants about the way in which racial categories are ordered, I would be curious to see what they think about the various strategies and schemas to manage the inherent hierarchy that exists in lists. In particular, the census form lists White racial identity first, while both the Common Application and ApplyTexas application alphabetize their racial classifications, hence, listing White last. Although these details may only seem important on a micro-level, it is possible that they have larger psychological and social implications. Thus, a revised study would address this design detail more directly.

As the participants’ sentiments in this study suggest, we must strive to create and embrace new ways of thinking and communicating about race as a concept of multiplicity, for language creates reality. Consequently, our past and present language are not conducive to hybrid racial identities, and many would argue the same for more

standard racial classifications. This limitation is not only a challenge for biracial individuals, but monoracial individuals as well. To be sure, they also experience racial pigeonholing, stereotyping, and discrimination as a result of problematic labels and associations. However, the fact remains that those navigating two or more racial spaces find themselves at the intersection of cultures with different sets of social codes and practices, which ultimately make it difficult to cultivate a stable identity in many contexts.

## VI. CONCLUSION

As crucial findings in this study illustrate, the surveyed documents leave much to be desired. Specifically, questions that solicit information about racial and ethnic identity in each form—namely the ApplyTexas application—by and large lack a format and mechanism by which to allow respondents a clear way to express biracial identity. And as the participant consensus in this study suggests, there is room for enhancement of such questions, both in their use of racial categories and visual design. For technical communicators, understanding the human hand behind these decisions is key. While one can assume the data gathered about student applicants is used for both admissions and metrics purposes to measure an institution's overall attractiveness—from matriculation to retention to graduation, and of course diversity—these factors may not be immediately apparent to those completing their application. In fact, many applicants may not even consider the role affirmative action plays in this context. Thus, a greater push for clarity and transparency is in order. Consequently, if race is to be an essential concept of the demographical lexicon, applicants should not be confused about it. Rather, it should be presented and defined more clearly—or at the very least, more accurately according to social practices.

In the larger social realm of race-related issues, these concerns may seem like minor rhetorical hiccups. Still, they reveal subtle truths about the nature of biracial identity expression that confirm a need for a serious examination of existing practices beyond this study and others like it. Certainly, to many these are just forms—these are just questions. However, for mixed individuals like myself, there may be more at stake. This is not simply an issue of usability or confusing language—it is about authenticity,

truth, and duty to the American people and future generations of American students, a thriving segment of the population which is becoming more diverse year by year. In the end, we benefit from the feedback we get from the source—the students—on the development of such questions; their acceptance into college may depend on it.

### **Considerations for Further Research**

Given the limited scope and reach of this study, further research is necessary to determine how certain factors enhance, complicate, or equalize the findings uncovered herein. Some possible variables to consider in a future revival of this study include questions about participants' family history in relation to immigration and socio-economic backgrounds, among others.

Aside from improvements to the present project, other studies pose potential avenues for new knowledge. For instance, because this study examined separate sets of freshmen and graduate students, the findings might be different in a study that traced the possible changes in students' approaches to self-identification in these contexts over time; by working with traditional freshmen students and those with plans to pursue a graduate degree, it is possible that I would uncover different results. At the very least, this more limited, long-term approach would guarantee a more controlled and reliable pool of participants, and hopefully, responses.

Moreover, interesting findings might be derived from exploring how Black/Latinx and Asian/Latinx students self-identify in contexts like those surveyed here, as these demographics have yet to be tapped in specific ways. In particular, because Black/Latinx students inhabit cultures that higher education has tried to heavily recruit, especially through the creation of HSI and historically black colleges and universities (HBCU), it

would be interesting to study this demographic to see how these institution types affect their experiences and sense of identity. Of course, this is merely a sampling of the possibilities that lie within this area of study, but are worthwhile considerations, nonetheless. As cultural perceptions about these issues continue to evolve, more are sure to be on the horizon.

## **APPENDIX SECTION**

A. FORMS

B. IN-CLASS RECRUITMENT PRESENTATION

C. RECRUITMENT EMAIL

## APPENDIX A: FORMS

### A. 2010 U.S. Census Form

→ **NOTE:** Please answer **BOTH** Question 8 about Hispanic origin and Question 9 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.

**8. Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?**

☐ No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin

☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano

☐ Yes, Puerto Rican

☐ Yes, Cuban

☐ Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin — *Print origin, for example, Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on.* ↗

**9. What is Person 1's race? Mark ☒ one or more boxes.**

☐ White

☐ Black, African Am., or Negro

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.* ↗

<input type="checkbox"/> Asian Indian	<input type="checkbox"/> Japanese	<input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian
<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/> Korean	<input type="checkbox"/> Guamanian or Chamorro
<input type="checkbox"/> Filipino	<input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese	<input type="checkbox"/> Samoan
<input type="checkbox"/> Other Asian — <i>Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.</i> ↗	<input type="checkbox"/> Other Pacific Islander — <i>Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.</i> ↗	

☐ Some other race — *Print race.* ↗

## B. Common Application

Common Application

Profile

Family

Education

Testing

Activities

Writing

Profile

Preview

► Personal Information

► Address

► Contact Details

▼ Demographics

Religious preference

Select

U.S. Armed forces status

Select

Are you Hispanic or Latino?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Clear

Regardless of your answer to the prior question, please indicate how you identify yourself. (Select one or more)

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native

☐ Asian

☐ Black or African American

☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

☐ White

The questions in this section, while helpful to colleges, are entirely optional, and you're welcome to move on without answering them. Before you do, please confirm for us that you've completed this section to your satisfaction. \*

☐ Yes, I have completed this section to my satisfaction.

Back

Continue

Instructions and Help

Ethnicity

The ethnicity question on the Common Application has been updated to meet the Department of Education reporting requirements. Answers to the ethnicity question are not required for submission. If you choose to answer this question, you may provide whatever answer you feel best applies to you or any groups of which you feel you are a part. You can answer all or none of the questions. If you wish to answer the ethnicity question but feel that the established categories do not fully capture how you identify yourself, you may provide more detail in the Additional Information section of the application. [-]

[more]



## C. ApplyTexas Application

### 7. Ethnicity and Race:

Are you Hispanic or Latino? (a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race)

☐ Yes ☐ No

Please select the racial category or categories with which you most closely identify. Check as many as apply.

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native

☐ Asian

☐ Black or African American

☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

☐ White

## **APPENDIX B: IN-CLASS RECRUITMENT PRESENTATION**

The following transcripts outline the speech I gave when visiting classes to recruit research participants.

### **Presentation to Freshmen Students**

Hello. My name is Amanda Scott and I am currently pursuing a master's degree in technical communication here at Texas State. Today I'd like to talk to you about a research study I am conducting. My research involves examining the effects documents like the ApplyTexas college application have on biracial individuals, particularly those with one Latino-a parent and one white parent. Specifically, these forms request information regarding race and ethnicity, and since mixed Latino-a/White individuals do not fit into one specific category, I am interested in examining how and if this affects the way they identify on these forms, along with their sense of self, in general. To gather this data, I plan to conduct both private, one-on-one interviews with select participants, as well as focus groups with five to six individuals, wherein participants will be asked to respond to predetermined questions as a group. In both settings, participants will be asked to share feelings about their personal identity, as well as respond to questions specifically about the design of the ApplyTexas questions about race and ethnicity. Whether you are chosen to participate in a one-on-one interview or focus group, your involvement will require about 2-3 hours of your time.

I'm looking for currently enrolled freshmen students at Texas State University who are between the ages of 17 and 19 and who completed the ApplyTexas application when applying for admission. If you participate in this study, your responses may be published as part of the study's results, though unidentifiable. However, all raw data will be kept confidential and only I will have access to it. Moreover, your participation is voluntary and very much appreciated, but you may opt out at any time during the study. While there will be no compensation for your involvement, it is my belief that your participation will be greatly beneficial for current and future students, as well as the field of technical communication.

If you would like to get in touch with me with questions or concerns regarding this study, please feel free to contact me at [aes126@txstate.edu](mailto:aes126@txstate.edu). In the meantime, if you are interested in participating and feel that you fit the parameters of this study, feel free to sign up as a prospective participant on this sign-up sheet. You can also email me directly at [aes126@txstate.edu](mailto:aes126@txstate.edu) to sign-up as well.

Thank you for your time. I hope you will consider participating in this study.

### **Presentation to Graduate Students**

Hello. My name is Amanda Scott and I am currently pursuing a master's degree in technical communication here at Texas State. Today I'd like to talk to you about a

research study I am conducting. My research involves examining the effects documents like the ApplyTexas college application have on biracial individuals, particularly those with one Latino-a parent and one white parent. Specifically, these forms request information regarding race and ethnicity, and since mixed Latino-a/White individuals do not fit into one specific category, I am interested in examining how and if this affects the way they identify on these forms, along with their sense of self, in general. To gather this data, I plan to conduct both private, one-on-one interviews with select participants, as well as and focus groups with five to six individuals, wherein participants will be asked to respond to predetermined questions as a group. In both settings, participants will be asked to share feelings about their personal identity, as well as respond to questions specifically about the design of the ApplyTexas questions about race and ethnicity. Whether you are chosen to participate in a one-on-one interview or focus group, your involvement will require about 2-3 hours of your time.

I am looking for currently enrolled first-time graduate students at Texas State University and who completed the ApplyTexas application when applying for admission. If you participate in this study, your responses may be published as part of the study's results, though unidentifiable. However, all raw data will be kept confidential and only I will have access to it will be kept confidential and only I will have access to it. Moreover, your participation is voluntary and very much appreciated, but you may opt out at any time during the study. While there will be no compensation for your involvement, it is my belief that your participation will be greatly beneficial for current and future students, as well as the field of technical communication.

If you would like to get in touch with me with questions or concerns regarding this study, please feel free to contact me at [aes126@txstate.edu](mailto:aes126@txstate.edu). In the meantime, if you are interested in participating and feel that you fit the parameters of this study, feel free to sign up as a prospective participant on this sign-up sheet. You can also email me directly at [aes126@txstate.edu](mailto:aes126@txstate.edu) to sign-up as well.

Thank you for your time. I hope you will consider participating in this study.

## **APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT EMAIL**

This email message is an approved request for participation in research that has been approved or declared exempt by the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Dear Prospective Research Participant,

The purpose of this email is to inform you about a research study I am conducting, for which I am seeking participants. My research involves examining the effects documents like the ApplyTexas college application have on biracial individuals, particularly those with one Latino-a parent and one white parent. Specifically, these forms request information regarding race and ethnicity, and since mixed Latino-a/White individuals do not fit into one specific category, I am interested in examining how and if this affects the way they identify on these forms, along with their sense of self, in general. To gather this data, I plan to conduct both private, one-on-one interviews with select participants and focus groups with five to six individuals, wherein participants will be asked to respond to predetermined questions as a group. In both settings, participants will be asked to share feelings about their personal identity, as well as respond to questions regarding the design of the ApplyTexas's questions about race and ethnicity. Whether you are chosen to participate in a one-on-one interview or focus group, your involvement will require about 2-3 hours of your time.

I am looking for currently enrolled freshmen students between the ages of 17 and 19 or first-time graduate students, who completed the ApplyTexas application when applying for admission. If you participate in this study, your responses may be published as part of the study's results, though unidentifiable. However, all raw data will be kept confidential and only I will have access to it. Moreover, your participation is voluntary and very much appreciated, but you may opt out at any time during the study. While there will be no compensation for your involvement, it is my belief that your participation will be greatly beneficial for current and future students, as well as the field of technical communication.

If you feel that you fit the requirements above and would like to participate in this study, please contact me at [aes126@txstate.edu](mailto:aes126@txstate.edu) or at (713) 302-4433. Also, please contact me with any questions or concerns you may have.

Thank you for your time. I hope you will consider participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Amanda Scott

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This project [EXP2015V102069L] was approved by the Texas State IRB on October 26, 2015. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr.

Jon Lasser (512-245-3413 - [lasser@txstate.edu](mailto:lasser@txstate.edu)) and to Becky Northcut, Director, Research Integrity & Compliance (512-245-2314 - [bnorthcut@txstate.edu](mailto:bnorthcut@txstate.edu)). This email message is an approved request for participation in research that has been approved or declared exempt by the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB).

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