Programmatic Perspectives

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CPTSC Announces New External Program Review Service

The CPTSC External Program Review Taskforce (ExPRT) was created to establish a standardized, repeatable external program review process. By establishing this process, ExPRT enables CPTSC to support technical, scientific, or professional communication program administrators to develop, maintain, and improve quality programs. It also assists with both internal and external accreditation.

Once CPTSC members request a review, they will receive a detailed program review guide. It defines program reviews in terms of their overall purpose, types of reviews available, and how the results of the reviews may be used. This guide provides a detailed overview of each stage in the program review process, including the self-study, the external reviewers visit, and the final report.

Frequently Asked Questions

How do we request a program review?

Programs interested in having CPTSC assist with their program review should contact a member of the CPTSC Immediate Past President (see below) and complete an application at https://cptsc.org/resources/program-review/.

How much does a program review cost?

CPTSC charges an administration fee of $250, payable to CPTSC. The requesting institution pays each reviewer $2,000.00 plus covers all costs for travel and lodging. Programs should also consider the time and resources that program reviews require internally. The self-study requires considerable effort and can take six months or more to complete. Hosting an external reviewer also requires considerable planning and effort from the requesting institution.

How long should a program be established before it requests a review?

Programs can request a review at any time. However, we recommend that newly established programs operate for at least five years before an external review. Programs also need to consider the review cycle at their institution. Generally, external program reviews are conducted every seven to eight years, depending on the institution's accreditation requirements. Every program would be reviewed once within this period for the purpose of accreditation.

Do program review requirements change depending on the size of the program?

No, the review process and requirements are the same for all programs regardless of size or number of degrees offered. For example, if your department included both graduate and undergraduate TPC programs, all programs would be included as part of the review.

For more details, visit the CPTSC Website at https://cptsc.org/resources/program-review/ *or contact the Immediate Past President Tharon Howard at tharon@clemson.edu.*

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Editors' Introduction to Issue 16.1

Rhonda Stanton

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Montana State University

Welcome to Issue 16.1 of *Programmatic Perspectives*. In this issue, we have five timely and relevant research articles from excellent scholars; we have one interesting and helpful program showcase, and four book reviews that may help you decide your next book selection.

Research Articles

With recruitment strategies becoming more and more important in today's higher education climate, the information Angela Crow and Jen Almjeld share in their case study, "Story Versus Search: Writing Studies Graduate Recruitment Lessons Learned," could be helpful to program directors who need fresh ideas on how to best recruit students into their programs.

In "Understanding and Developing Programmatic Support for Doctoral Students," Mina Bikmohammadi and Erin Clark report on "29 doctoral programs in TPC and related disciplines" and offer their "recommendations for program directors to strengthen mentorship, resource allocation, and program visibility."

Turning to broader curriculum goals, R. Elle Smith and Chen Chen in "From Policy to Practice: Trauma-Informed Approaches to Student Attendance" explore how trauma-informed pedagogical (TIP) principles can support more inclusive classroom attendance policies by treating instructors as technical communicators. The study highlights the tensions between flexibility and accountability and offers TIP-based strategies to foster inclusivity in both classroom practice and broader institutional policy.

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Josephine Walwema, Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Jessica R. Edwards, and Sweta Baniya in "Social Justice and Intercultural Issues in Service-Learning Pedagogy: An Empirical Study" present findings from focus groups with TPC scholars and instructors who integrate service-learning or community engagement into their pedagogy. It explores how these educators translate concepts of social justice and intercultural communication into course design to address real-world inequities. The study offers empirical evidence supporting the value of social justice-oriented service learning in advancing inclusive programmatic goals and equipping students with meaningful, career-relevant skills.

Jason Tham and Shannon Samson, in "Enhancing University Honors Students' Experience with Technical Communication and User Experience Projects," provide insight into another curriculum area that program directors can use to increase participation in an important student population. The authors report on a case study of this course and highlight the plan's development, instructor and student experiences, and how institutional goals can align with disciplinary teaching strategies.

Program Showcase

In the program showcase, "The Synergy of 'Design Thinking and Communication' and its New Faculty Mentoring Program," Michele Zugnoni shares about an innovative "interdisciplinary university program designed primarily for first-year engineering students at Northwestern University." The program has "two courses that combine instruction in communication with instruction in engineering design and are taught jointly by an instructor from each discipline. This creates a rich and diverse learning experience for students and a powerful pedagogical experience for faculty."

Book Reviews

The book reviews in this issue include a review of an edited collection *Keywords in Technical Communications,* a collection of 39 essays edited by Han Yu and Jonathan Buehl, reviewed by D-Jay Bidwell. Douglas Walls reviews *Rewriting Work*, edited by Lora Anderson, a collection that looks at how TPC has changed over the last 20 years with a focus on "place," particularly the workplace. Kristopher Purzycki reviews Erin Clark's book *Feminist Technical Communication: Apparent Feminisms, Slow Crisis, and the Deepwater Horizon Disaster,* a case study of disaster communications through an apparent feminist lens. Emanuella Afimaa reviews a book from Stephen Carradini and Jason Swarts, *Text at Scale: Corpus Analysis in Technical Communication,* in which the authors "provid[e] readers with a robust understanding of the method, its functionality, and possible applications in technical communication practice, pedagogy and research."

Story Versus Search: Writing Studies Graduate Recruitment Lessons Learned

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Abstract Recruitment is an increasingly important part of program and graduate directors' work and this paper combines a case study of one small, masters-only Writing studies program's work to thoughtfully and systematically craft digital content to help grow our program along with survey data from current graduate students and alums revealing what sorts of information, stories, and search terms prospective students seek and need to make decisions about applying and committing to graduate schools. Taking up a user experience approach, we sought to understand the ways digital recruitment tools (social media, emails, webpages, etc.) attract and inform prospective students with specific attention to ways social media story and online searches work together to engage prospective students. We found that students evaluate programs first based on funding/costs and curriculum, and if they think the program might meet their expectations, then they evaluate social media to see students and their experiences in the program. These findings suggest that social media stories build and sustain community, but these stories may not reach prospective students without an awareness of search terms and strategies used by those seeking a graduate program.

Keywords graduate student recruitment, writing studies and professional writing, content strategy, social media tools

Introduction

In Jen Almjeld's six years as director of our professional writing master's program, she learned a great deal about university budgets and rules

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regarding tuition rates, a little about visa applications for international students, about program assessment and, of course, about recruitment. Her training as a compositionist and writing teacher was clearly helpful in much of this, but the sales part of the job, the "pitch" needed to excite and entice prospective students, felt like something new and scholarship in the field provided little advice about how to "sell" our program to students we knew it would benefit.

Initially telling stories, a reflex for most writing studies faculty, felt like the ideal recruitment tool and this dovetailed with increasing pressure from our graduate school, particularly during the precarious Covid years, for all program directors to share digital stories of student successes, career opportunities, and alumni placements. Such stories generally highlight individual accomplishments of exceptional students as a way to inspire or prove the success of a program based on students' achievements. Creating and sharing these stories requires literacies for digital content strategy and so Almjeld quickly turned to Angela Crow, a fellow faculty member also serving as our program's social media manager.

Similar to Almjeld's experience as grad director, when Crow agreed to oversee the department's social media and parts of the website, she was and wasn't prepared for the role of social media manager nor the task of advertising programs. While Crow has familiarity with managing website content, her understanding of social media comes from studying rather than creating content. Crow focused her research on the rhetorical strategies different influencers use when advocating in online venues like Twitter and Instagram but assessing others' posts and creating content are two different realities. When the administrative assistant who had been designated the program's point person for social media took a different job and we couldn't quickly hire someone to replace our colleague, we began working together to figure out how to spread the word about our program in ways that were both glowing and honest. Together we learned about branding our graduate writing program, strategies for garnering clicks and views online, and about the limits of story in service of recruitment.

Ours is not an unfamiliar story, particularly for master's programs facing similar pressure to recruit and enroll ever-increasing graduate cohorts without the administrative resources of a Ph.D. program. Both of us juggled our teaching load, our research and other service obligations, and we tried to address the desire to increase our program in the midst of our own learning curve regarding social media and its role in recruitment. Recruitment pressure in the absence of resources and explicit training seems a common challenge for program administrators in our field. As we experimented and sought out the rather limited literature on this work, we became more curious about how or whether social media played a role in recruitment. We created a pilot study, and the results, coupled with our own experiences, suggest that the stories we tell on social media about our program don't really help potential students to know about our program. Instead, our research suggests social media works best to celebrate and sustain our current students' sense of community.

Our Graduate Program Story

Our graduate program began as the Institute for Technical and Scientific Communication in 1998 and then became part of the School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication in 2008. After major curricular revisions in 2013, a version of our current program—housed in a stand-alone writing studies department—emerged. We offer two specializations, Public and Professional Writing and Health and Science Writing, with 33 required credit hours, six of those hours for either a thesis or internship project. The majority of our students receive assistantships that include tuition waiver and a stipend for working with faculty, teaching freshman composition or as writing or digital media specialists in other departments on campus. Up until the last three years or so, we have mainly attracted students from our state and others nearby in the northeast, but our most recent cohorts have included a greater number of out-of-state and international students leading us to new questions about how and where prospective students hear about our program. We presumed that we were reaching our target student audiences thanks to the Graduate School's recruiting assistance and because of our school's status from regional to R2 university, but we wanted to make sure our approaches were working for all students, particularly those from outside our region.

For Almjeld, student recruitment was an often invisible but always critical part of leading a graduate program. This recruitment took many forms including one-on-one meetings and phone calls with prospective students, scheduling campus visits, virtual and in-person info sessions, and direct emails. It also meant sustaining and revising the grad program's digital identity which included a website created and coded by the previous graduate director, two Facebook accounts, one for enrolled students and alums and a more public-facing page for prospective students and other stakeholders, a fledgling Instagram account and then-Twitter account. During Almjeld's tenure, the grad program's website, now nested in the school's main page along with pages for "Minor," "Major" and "First Year Writing" was streamlined and brought into compliance with the university's branding guidelines. It has since been revised by the current graduate director to include seven individual pages including sections on "Admissions," "Financial Support" and "Careers." Almjeld, working with the previous social media manager, also made a concerted effort to create content for more frequent social media posts including announcements for upcoming recruitment events, reminders for graduation application deadlines, job leads for alums, and photos and short captions about everyday occurrences like classes meeting on our sunny main Quad or gathered for a fire pit at the director's house. In 2017, when Almjeld became director, social media seemed the key to marketing. Everything from clothing and restaurants to vacations and homebuying was moving from web-centric spaces to social media and our university urged programs to beef up our presence on all kinds of social media spaces.

For Crow, who was new to figuring out social media for a department presence, the recruitment and social media piece felt like an intergenerational challenge (May, 2021) demanding focus on ways people in their twenties now search for grad programs. While Laura Palmer's (2012) article on Facebook ads revealed the complications of shifting advertising strategies over time, Crow hadn't anticipated how much she might need to learn in order to do this work, both in terms of content, but also in terms of re/learning content management systems, and programs/resources that facilitate social media content creation and data analysis of reach. Together Crow and Almjeld drew on university recommendations including the advice to limit the numbers of social media accounts. Instead of accounts for undergraduate and graduate content, we were encouraged to have one account for Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter. We were slow to adopt TikTok because of the need to create video, and then our governor banned TikTok in 2022, so we relied on Instagram to reach prospective students. We agreed with our university social media brand guidelines, suggesting that the Facebook platform is "the best place to reach older demographics" and decided to approach Facebook as a platform to communicate with alums and faculty even as we kept in mind that "younger audiences are still consuming content" here (JMU Brand Guide, Social Media Platforms 2025). LinkedIn also became an important social media space for us in an attempt to connect prospective, current and graduated students for networking opportunities and also to model this digital writerly identity performance for current students. Finally, we saw X-Twitter as a venue for announcements relevant to faculty and graduate students at other universities. We often posted similar content across multiple platforms due to resource constraints and when pressed for time we privileged the creation of content on Instagram as it seemed the obvious place to connect with prospective and current students and younger alums.

Our challenges, when it comes not only to choosing the best channels for recruitment but also to find the time and energy needed to maintain these channels, seem common to other program directors in writing studies. In 2021, while serving as co-chair of the Master's Degree Consortium of Writing Studies

Specialists (MDCWSS), Almjeld and colleagues from the MDCWSS presented a virtual workshop at the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) about program profiles as recruitment tools. In a packed virtual session, it was clear that many writing studies leaders face recruitment pressures and that few of us had the time or training to really know where to start. As part of this project, we reviewed about a decade's worth of CPTSC conference programs, and although we found that recruitment has been discussed numerous times at the conference, there remains little in the literature in the field about best practices for program administrators to take up this work. The skillset needed for this sort of sales work is further complicated by the ethical implications of telling the best story you can about a program while also sharing information that will help students—particularly those from underrepresented populations—decide whether or not your program and community are really a good fit.

This paper offers a case study of one program's work to thoughtfully and systematically craft digital content to help grow our program and offers survey data from current graduate students and alums revealing what sorts of information, stories, and search terms prospective students seek and need to make decisions about applying and committing to graduate schools. Specifically, our study considers what messages prospective students need and want and how we might best create a vibrant program brand that invites others to join us. The study combines data analysis of our program website with survey data from 19 current students and alums from our graduate program. The survey asked participants to consider their own graduate program search processes and strategies, keywords used in such searches, and the importance of types of information (employment rates of graduates, housing availability and health and wellness resources, for example) shared on webpages and social media accounts by graduate programs. Combined with our own experiences with recruitment and program branding, this paper shares challenges and lessons learned about the tensions between story and search as well as resources for those taking up recruitment work.

Graduate Student Recruitment

A review of CPTSC annual conference programs from the last 10 years or so, 2010-2022, sheds light on both conference and scholarly trends in our field regarding recruitment strategies. Although the topic has been the focus of some conference talks and panels over the years, recruitment issues, limited resources and training for such work, and best practices for the field have not remained at the forefront of professional conferences or journals for tech comm and writing studies program administrators. In 2010, a session by Bill Williamson and Jodi Radloff focused on departmental identity and in 2012 we see things like "Student Perceptions of

Disciplinary Identity Within an English Department's Technical/Professional Writing Emphasis" by Jamie McDaniel and 2013's "Like This if you Agree: Developing a Professional Writing Program's Identity for the Social Media Era" by Jeffrey A. Rice. These early attempts to brand programs seem tied to the growth of tech comm programs in general. In 2014, there were two sessions on online and hybrid programs, two on program naming and several on surviving times of austerity. This concern about sustaining and growing programs resulted in some interesting panels in 2014 including "Redefining and Rebranding an Effective Program" by Nick Carrington. The abstract for the presentation explains

> Our program has been fighting the numbers game for many years. We are constantly looking for new ways to recruit and help prospective students, their parents, and our administration understand what we teach and why it is worthwhile. Attendees will take away some recruiting and marketing strategies to implement in their own programs. (Carrington, 2014)

In the same panel, Rick Mott presented "Social Media's Role in Program Administration" explaining "how Technical Communication (TC) program administrators can exploit social media networks to connect to and communicate with the four primary TC stakeholders: current students and instructors in the major, potential students, and alumni." These panels presented a decade ago suggest the pairing of social media for recruitment and branding work and Carrington's work, in particular, demonstrates the plight of program administrators "constantly looking for new ways to recruit." Our study of literature on the subject suggests that a) program administrators are still looking and b) there's not much help to be found in literature in the field.

In 2015, the CPTSC conference seemed to be paying particular attention to Twitter with numerous panels discussing ways to conduct programmatic research (Lam), bolster program identity (Hannah) and attract prospective students (Freiss). The three authors developed this talk into the article, "Connecting Programmatic Research with Social Media" (2016). In 2016, Marj Rush Hovde offered a talk on UX-informed grad program website revision for recruitment and Felicia Chong's session abstract noted, "we have frequently discussed recruitment strategies at CPTSC conferences … but there is surprisingly little literature in our scholarship that specifically focuses on our recruitment strategies and their effectiveness." We believe this remains the case eight years later. In 2017, Lisa Melonçon and Bob Johnson offered a workshop on "How to brand technical and professional communication programs" explaining, "the purpose of branding is to identify and to express the truth or value of an organization." Like us, Melonçon and Johnson seem focused on both the ethical and effective components of program marketing. That same year, Julie Watts presented "Using a social media strategy to recruit master's students in technical and professional communication." Like Watts, we came to our work believing in the power of social media to recruit perspective students, but our study suggests that spaces like Facebook and Instagram are afterthoughts for modern students who seem to rely most heavily on keyword search and websites to make decisions about where to study. In 2019, we see a turn to social justice work in TPC and this shifts the conference recruitment discussions to ways to recruit and retain more diverse students to our programs (DeNora, Oswal, and Zdenek). From 2020-2022, the conference remained understandably focused on Covid-era changes and challenges with little mention of branding or recruitment strategies. Our overview of conference presentations suggests to us that while CPTSC and other writing studies programs have seemingly been worried about and talking about recruitment for more than a decade, relatively little has made it to the literature in the field. Also, while social media has been embraced in our curriculum and internships, it seems we have yet to figure out exactly how to harness its power for attracting new students to our graduate programs, despite the promise of social media as the silver bullet for all kinds of marketing.

Academic recruitment resources, in our experience, are sort of hard to come by. Despite the immense time commitment required for recruitment and the increasing pressure to constantly grow programs felt by faculty, maybe particularly graduate faculty leading smallish, masters-only graduate programs like ours, research in graduate studies recruitment is fairly thin. Past higher education recruitment research has focused on specific disciplines like STEM (Shadding, et al., 2016; Wall Bortz, et al., 2020), doctoral programs (Griffin and Muñiz, 2011) and specific underrepresented populations like international students (Amirali and Bakken, 2015). In 1987, doctoral student Patricia Baron conducted a survey reaching 250 members of the Council of Graduate Schools about marketing techniques used to attract prospective students to address the idea that "recruitment of graduate students is still of great concern to graduate deans" (p. 8). Although "developing and distributing promotional materials" (p. 8) was a common strategy, the most effective recruitment at the time was "considered to be personal contact." Twenty years later, in 2007, Michael Poock surveyed members of the National Association of Graduate Admission Professionals to better understand the shift in admissions' focus on "racial diversity" to courting "underrepresented graduate students" (p. 169). At the time he noted that "much of this research on recruiting and retaining a diverse student population has focused on undergraduate students" (p. 169), and so his survey of 93 grad school admissions officers filled an important gap in graduate education recruitment strategies. The survey found that only four of 93 surveyed schools had full-time recruitment staff, and "two-thirds of the participants collaborated with others on campus" (p. 174) with the same number of schools allocating no funds for recruitment. While useful information, only 8% of Poock's participants were from R2 institutions with master's only offerings like our own campus. One important finding suggests that "doctoral institutions with a greater graduate student enrollment have admission professionals who view many of their activities as effective relative to their counterparts at small, master's level institutions" (p. 178). How then do smaller departments like our own make recruitment initiatives more effective and sustainable with fewer resources?

As recently as 2020, Wall Bortz, et al., noted that "doctoral student recruitment is a dynamic, complex, and under-researched phenomenon" (p. 927). Their project, focusing on recruiting strategies in STEM doctoral programs, discovered that the math, science, technology and engineering programs "commonly utilize financial resources as their main recruitment tool" (p. 928). Such findings are especially important for small writing studies graduate programs with limited budgets and often lacking grant-funded assistantships and stipends. Another STEM-focused study by Jared Russell (2020) considers ways student diversity recruitment and retention may be impacted by "undergraduate research experiences" (p. 343) coupled with faculty mentoring in structed bridge programs. Such on-campus intensive summer programs are impressive ways to grow future scholars but require both time and huge financial commitments (to cover housing, food, stipends for participants, stipends for faculty, etc.) and seem to focus on transitioning an institution's undergrads to grad students rather than attracting those from other schools. Other recruitment research focuses not on disciplines, but on student populations. Tomika Greer, Olivia Johnson and Desmond Delk's 2021 case study of a two-day recruitment program responds to the "dearth of research on factors that increase the likelihood of underrepresented minority (URM) college students' enrollment and completion of graduate studies in the social sciences" (p. 371). The authors argue specifically that

> to successfully recruit URM students to graduate programs, student development professionals in higher education must consider the barriers to graduate education and devise strategies to help students overcome those barriers by increasing their cultural capital and social capital related to graduate school participation. (p. 375)

While we lack the infrastructure and funding of recruiting programs like the one profiled by Greer et al., we try to include an awareness and acknowledgement in our digital marketing materials of the social, financial, and cultural obstacles for international, first-generation, and other underrepresented students considering our master's program. Regardless of exactly who we are trying to recruit to our programs, the question is what resources and stories are needed to invite new student populations into our discipline.

Recruiting and Branding with Social Media

A review of recruitment talks and papers suggests the need to consider the role of social media in recruiting for both graduate and undergraduate programs. The time commitment and cost of creating social media content is practically challenging, as Jennifer Roth Miller, Brandy Dieterle, Jennifer deWinter and Stephanie Vie (2020) indicate in an extensive review of programs who have a social media presence for their technical communication degrees. Miller et al. offer a vibrant heuristic that applies beyond social media to other content channels, and while their focus is specifically on technical communication programs, their heuristic helped us explore and develop approaches even though our graduate program's content needed to land in social media channels alongside our undergraduate program's content. They reminded us that an organization's social media content requires a plan, including who will play point person, who will oversee social media management and what will happen when a point person or managers resign (p. 27). They also raise significant concerns about turning social media content creation over to students, and what kinds of roles are feasible for students to take up in the creation of social media content, from creation to posting to encouraging engagement (p. 27). Miller et al., similarly to Laura Palmer (2012), suggest that management needs to be stable and consistent, and they also point to the potential legal as well as training considerations in working with students to generate social media content (p. 27). Because this content shifts so much more frequently than website content, the tension is always about time and resources to create and encourage engagement.

In addition to considering available branding and recruiting resources that would assist us by providing a helpful heuristic (pp. 28–29), we needed to determine viable tools in the midst of a university that was also beginning to create its infrastructure for social media. As Elise Versosa Hurley and Amy C. Kimme Hea (2020) suggest, content strategy includes understanding how to leverage social media tools (p. 126), and when we took up this social media agenda, we were learning about the possible interfaces at the same time that the social media manager for our university was securing tools that would help us to better assess our social media reach. To give some context, our department didn't create an Instagram account until 2019; at the same time, our university's infrastructural commitment to social media management has been slowly evolving. About a year into our collaborative project, our university's social media manager was able to secure some of the tools for us and other university departments including a platform that facilitated scheduling, digital asset management, data analytics, and security assistance. In addition, we were able to participate in a better functioning collaborative space for people across campus who were doing this kind of labor through Teams. These kinds of tools facilitate our ability to plan more effectively for university-wide social media campaigns, to control when and where we post, create succinct data reports, and offer added capabilities to mute unwanted viral responses. In other words, in the midst of calls for increased attention to social media as a recruitment tool, we experienced the challenge of creating while also participating in an expanding infrastructure build out, with the social media manager increasingly cultivating a network of people who create content across the university. As we progressed with our social media knowledge, and as our university's social media manager increased networked developmental strategies, we were able to learn from and rely on her expertise with security and legal considerations.

This local building of social media resources, together with the framings offered in Miller et al.'s (2020) heuristics were augmented by our growing understanding of research in content strategy. Part of our local approach to social media creation included hiring entry-level graduate assistants who could work in the position for a year or two at most, so Crow found it useful to draw on best practices in content strategy (Casey, 2023; Halvorson and Rach, 2012) and ask the new GA to conduct and update content audits of specific accounts. This first work assignment would best be described by Liza Potts and Laura Gonzales (2020) in their content management/strategy course as a "landscape analysis" (60), a process of comparing our approaches to social media content with other departments at our own and at other institutions. This kind of first assignment helps a new person to become familiar with the levels of branding typical in a university along with various media policies while helping us to notice new patterns or changes in others' social media approaches.

While much of the scholarship on social media focuses on its use for program identity and general branding, less is available on the effectiveness of social media as a recruitment tool. Initially, we created content for recruitment based on our assumptions about how and when students might encounter our social media content. In our first year we developed (with the help of the graduate students in an editing course) week-by-week promotional social media recruitment content. However, after attending to metrics including likes, shares and views, we wanted to check the assumption that students would find our social media and consider the program because of the content created there. In Kate Crane's (2022) text, she suggests that "TPC program designers ought to demonstrate UX thinking while designing and assessing their programs and courses" (p. 5). When we consider ways of promoting material, we both have the habit of checking informally with students to understand how they use social media, but we realized our assumptions about students' uses needed a more formal study. As Verzosa Hurley and Hea (2020) suggest, "although students might be frequent users of social media, they likely have less experience considering social media in the classroom or even in their future lives as professionals," and in the research for this project, we wanted to see how and when our students visited our online content, and whether they considered it as part of their professional and academic decisions.

Our Study

When we first undertook online digital content work, we enlisted graduate students in a professional editing course, asking them to revise course descriptions and prune social media recruitment posts. We hoped that directly engaging students would make our posts more user friendly and focused. We started with clear goals for recruitment: growing the program, celebrating our new niche of medical rhetoric, sharing compelling stories, and making recruitment more manageable and systematic. After integrating the revised posts and descriptions into our social media for the annual recruitment period, we put together a research project to formally gather information about how students found our program and what made them choose us. In particular, this study asks, what messages should we be sharing with prospective students and in what modes? And how do we best sell a vibrant graduate program amidst the vague pressure to increase numbers that seem predicated on a model of scarcity and competition for students' attention?

In the summer of 2023, we created a questionnaire for alumni and current students asking a set of questions about content strategy in three channels: websites/web searches, email/informational sessions, and social media. In Fall 2023, drawing on a list of alums from 2011 to 2023 that we retain email addresses for as well as our current students, we sent out our survey to 73 people. We received 19 completed surveys, or a 26 percent response rate. Despite reaching back to our contacts from 2011, the earliest alumni information available in our relatively young school, our responses are understandably current student heavy. In order to protect the anonymity of both the current students and alumni we surveyed, we were reluctant to ask for graduation dates as this information seemed important identifiers in a small pool of less than 100. We knew, from open-ended responses that some participants were from earlier decades; for example, one alum's recollection that they "found a flier in 2008" about the graduate program suggests our results included at least a few older alums. Other responses, like one student sharing "I work at JMU," point to local part-time students currently enrolled in the program. While we were curious about ways recruitment might have evolved over the previous decade or so, we were most interested in understanding search strategies of students now inundated with social media channels and so the response pool felt appropriate to our goals. We also acknowledge that there’s a better chance of more recent students being able to better recall their academic search process from a year or two ago than those who studied with us in 2011. Despite the emphasis on more current students, our results do contain responses from many alums in the last five years as well as a couple from farther back.

Our decision to do a survey rather than interviews or focus groups was partly due to the desire to potentially reach more alums and also for the convenience of our participants as online surveys are much more flexible than in-person or even synchronous digital research settings. We designed an IRB-approved study that included 14 open-ended, multiple choice, and short answer questions in order to discover what search strategies and content prospective students used and looked for when evaluating whether they would keep a program on their list. Specifically, we asked what kinds of materials and artifacts helped them make decisions, what they expected in terms of web design and content, recruitment emails and informational sessions, and in social media. We concluded the survey with two groups of questions about a broader range of criteria impacting their decisions including cost, employment rates of graduates, and cost of living of the community alongside the importance of things like job preparation, caring and rigor in the prospective program. See the appendix for the full survey.

In this pilot study, we acknowledge some limitations, including a small number of respondents and a lack of geographic diversity. Ours is a pilot study with a focus on one program, and in a further study, we could imagine reaching out to multiple masters' program alumni to determine the role social media played in their choices, what search strategies were most common, and what rhetorical strategies seemed most effective and important to prospective students. We were also trying to understand why more international students had found us. Another possible limitation is our own researcher bias as we first approached the project in an effort to better understand ways to attract more diverse student populations to our program. Our university’s recent shift from R3 to R2 status may have created a greater marketing reach, but this was outside the scope of this survey. Our exciting increase in international students led us to first focus on telling stories that might attract marginalized student populations, while also depicting the challenges that our smallish, southern, mostly white community might present such populations. But we might also have asked directly about the role social media played in the increase in international students in relation to other modalities like website content, direct emails, and online information meetings.

Survey Findings

Our regional demographics

We began with a question that quickly gave us important information about who was participating in our study. We anticipated that several chose our program because they heard about it as an undergraduate while at our institution. We know we connect with local students, and our reach includes nearby universities (within 20 miles of our campus). With the skyrocketing costs of housing, relocation becomes an increasingly important financial consideration. In addition to local undergraduates, we also know that some of our potential graduate students participate in the university's tuition waiver program available to all faculty and staff. In our survey responses, nine respondents indicated that they attended JMU for undergraduate education, were staff members at JMU, or were from nearby institutions. In recent years, our student population has included people who are typically on the East Coast, and increasingly we have international students who find our program via online resources, our graduate school's recruitment reach, or because their mentors suggest our program. In this survey, 10 respondents indicated that they found our program using online searches (eight) or through recommendations from mentors at other institutions (two). In a follow up question, we asked specifically whether they used resources like the online Petersen Guide (https://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools.aspx), or other similar search services. None did. During actual searching, 11 of 19 reported first asking mentors for recommendations and more than half (10 of 19 respondents) reported creating their own list of specific universities they intended to learn more about.

Reasons for choosing a program

When searching, participants reported that finding a program that aligned with their professional writing goals was most important (10 of 19) followed by seven respondents who desired to stay in our region; six wanted to find a writing studies program that would prepare them to teach. Our survey offered seven options we anticipated might be important to prospective students, and perhaps unsurprisingly half of our respondents suggested criteria we had not thought to list including searching for "a more practical degree." Cost was a significant concern for several, with one responder reporting, "I wanted a program that was open and honest about funding opportunities." In addition, several were looking for careers "that didn't only prepare [them] for a career in academia."

Key word searches

We wanted to know what keywords prospective students used when searching. We offered several terms and found that in addition to state-specific searches (nine), and the basic type of education—a graduate program (or master's program) (14), searches were split between technical communication (nine), professional writing (11), writing studies (eight), and rhetoric and composition (eight). A few used business writing (four), science writing (two), or teaching writing (three) to search for schools. One respondent explained that search terms may differ based on translation. In our current cohort, we have five students from other countries who speak multiple languages and sometimes terms shift across continents, and so, as we consider future cohorts, we may want to expand key word considerations (St. Amant, 2020; Dayley & Walton, 2018). When we asked respondents to indicate the top five types of information needed to evaluate a program, they wanted to know about the place they would study (the department), about the students in the program, about the surrounding community, about internships, cost of living, housing availability, and about faculty. All 19 respondents placed cost within their top three considerations. Scholarships and assistantships (15) and explicit career path information (10) were two other popular categories of information sought by then-prospective students.

Web design/email marketing

Once our participants settled on a list of potential programs, we were interested in what they looked for on websites. They reported seeking information about degree completion (13), the sequence of courses and the curriculum (13), and a sense of whether they were prepared to do well in the curriculum (nine), or whether they had the background needed (eight). In their own words, they sought a connection between the curriculum and future career concerns – whether the curriculum would prepare them for the kinds of jobs they desired. One respondent explained, "I was looking for options that would be affordable and provide practical skills within my field of work." Another reported, "I'd start with looking at a place I wanted to work/job I wanted to do and [then] plan my way backwards based on the profiles of people who currently work in that place/job." When they offered opinions about web design, they wanted to quickly search for content (12), to see important keywords within the content (13), and ease in site navigation (15). They ranked the most helpful artifacts and texts for prospective students would be the program website (17) and direct email content (15). Social media was a distant third (3). We also asked what they remembered about materials and direct contact they had received during their searches. Respondents reported remembering emails, in person conversations, talking on the phone, and informational meetings, but none recalled memorable social media stories or posts.

Social media

When asked how likely they were to link to a program's social media, only four respondents, or 21 percent, said they were likely to follow a program's social media, while more than half (10 of 19) reported being unlikely or very unlikely to follow a prospective program's social media. The remaining five of 19 (26 percent) were only marginally likely to follow a prospective program's socials, suggesting to us that nearly 80 percent of prospective students in our survey are unlikely to become a program's social media follower. The minority that had or would attend to social media report looking at Instagram (seven) or LinkedIn (four), or a combination of either Facebook and Instagram (one), or Instagram and LinkedIn (one). Of the 10 who weighed in on how they used social media when looking for a graduate program, they reported mainly looking in order to gather a sense of the students. In one person's words: "Pictures and other content that gives me a sense of what it is like to study there. I especially look for pictures and testimonials from students." Two people were interested in design considerations: "the quality of the content," "what type of content," and "cohesiveness." Two of the 10 specifically referenced seeking information on faculty on social media, and one indicated an interest in alumni success stories. While they didn't imagine following a program's social media account, they indicated with these responses that they would browse the social media accounts to see students' stories in the program.

Discussion

These survey results are helping us to shape both our efforts on searches and the kinds of stories we create. It's also helping us to shape content strategies across several channels (Gonzales et al., 2016; Potts and Gonzales, 2020). One major consideration we've noted is how to tailor recruitment efforts differently for local versus non-local populations. People already living here or in neighboring towns seem to rely on a kind of local word of mouth, rather than on traditional digital recruitment content, finding out about our program because they see something on our university system of screens designed for announcements and advertisements, because they're taking an upper division course in our major, or because they see a friend's homework and find it intriguing (as one of our respondents reported). Given the local approach, we are considering how we might gather more information and develop a more cohesive plan to reach out to potential local students.

For those who find us through online searches, this study gives us a better understanding of how they search and find our program. Once they've added our program to their list of potential places to study, their information needs are similar to that of the local group with a focus on curriculum and funding. But non-local students also need help gathering a sense of the students in the program, alongside costs of living and how it will feel to live in our community. We anticipated, when constructing the survey, that people drew on a range of venues to gather information, and we weren't surprised to see the continued importance of the website content and the email communications compared to the ways people reported checking social media. What felt more surprising or perhaps merely nebulous is the complex role that story plays in recruitment. If the website search gives a student a sense of funding, curriculum viability, and faculty expertise, the social media venue seems to be the place students land for stories that help them determine whether they will fit with the student population. Search appears to bring us prospective students' attention, but social media stories might sustain that attention and help students truly imagine themselves in a place. As a result of these findings, we're trying different approaches to our social media content strategy to better assist these potential students as they gather information and decide whether they might feel a sense of belonging from browsing our social media content.

What We've Learned

While our survey results and our own successful—and failed—experiments with recruitment in multiple modes and using myriad digital tools have taught us important lessons about our own program in this specific moment, we don't claim to have identified best practices for other masters-only writing studies programs. We initially assumed that our social media stories/advertisements might reach prospective students, but we now realize that they must find us through the endless "noise" online before being able to hear such stories. In other words, we now think that both search and story are necessary for graduate recruitment and how you balance the two has much to do with specific goals, available resources and skillsets, and target audiences.

What we've gained and what follows is a better understanding of what questions we need to be asking, what sorts of resources we need to be seeking, and how to know what we don't know. While Almjeld, as director, was officially tasked with recruitment for the graduate program both by the university and the department, it was clear Crow, a partner in her own department, was needed to make the work both manageable and more effective. Having a recruitment partner to run things by, share ideas with, and share the workload lessens the time commitment and doubles the skillset needed to take on this complex work. Beyond your own department, consider seeking resources and partners with specific knowledge in search engine optimization (SEO). Because algorithms change often, and because university offices pay attention to those changes daily, it can help to reach out to local experts. Below are lessons we've learned about how to marry search and story and how to seek help doing both.

Grow CMS (Content Management Systems) Expertise and Attend to CRM (Customer Relationship Management) Resources

It's crucial to know who the local experts are in content management and search strategies on your campus and to reach out to collaborate with them, particularly on metadata and keyword choices. Neither Crow nor Almjeld is an expert on the always changing algorithms, but our Office of Digital Marketing helps us with the back-end work on a sophisticated CMS. Our university relies on two CMS experts to keep track of contemporary data analytics, and they can help us set up and test different webpages so that we could assess the best approaches for our unit. These are the same people who can help with SEO. It matters to know what appears when people search for our program, and to ensure that our program is one that appears. We recommend collaborating with local experts at least once a year to see what program information appears from keyword searches students typically use. In addition to the university's CMS, our university has slowly been transitioning to a CRM resource. Through that resource, especially in the Graduate School, which has more reach and access to more functions within the platform, we've had success contacting national organizations and other places potential students search. The relationship is synergistic as they have access to more infrastructure and funding, and we provide them with content and stories about our program.

Understand Local Social Media Support

Knowing about local infrastructure build outs and making the effort to know the local experts can save time and improve brand consistency. Unlike university infrastructure for websites, where templates are chosen by the communications office, social media is far less structured, leaving design considerations to local departments. We found it helpful to collaborate with the office that provides photography and promotional videos for our university because images and videos feature prominently in the stories we craft but are time-intensive to capture and create. If we know, for example, that students make decisions based on funding, we can work with university photographers to visually highlight our ability to connect students with GA positions. We can draw on photos of our GAs at work in various campus offices to help us tell that story. In addition, the university offers a video service, where we can propose a video, and if approved, we then participate in crafting a story that lands on our website as a YouTube video, promoting our program.

Take Advantage of Video

Neither of us are experts at video, but we've learned to create simple videos to take advantage of current algorithms. We're not so much advocating for video, as for video's ability to increase reach in shifting social media algorithms. At the moment, video stories do seem better able to stand out than other storytelling models and modes. We had access to the university posting resource Brandwatch for just under a year and this offered us a clearer understanding of analytics. In that time, we've realized that our reach is limited by the static use of photographs. As a result, we choose to create a few more Reels and Stories that feature students, capitalizing on Instagram's and Facebook's current algorithms and tapping into the popularity of TikTok without actually posting there. We learned the least labor-intensive ways to create videos, and the kinds of content that result in community engagement and greater reach. Such video content celebrates our students and also offers a glimpse of the community future students might join. We've also collaborated with faculty to figure out ways to, for example, feature videos of Zoomed-in guest speakers, capitalizing on great work already happening in our department. While video work is time consuming to learn and enact, using video from already happening events reduces time on task.

Create Easy "Asks" to Engage Faculty and Students in Celebrating Their Successes

To create viable and timely announcements, or to advertise amazing courses that might need a boost for enrollment in social media, we've learned how to get help from faculty and students by connecting with Miller et al.'s heuristic in terms of training. We created forms for faculty and students to fill out that are designed to be the equivalent of a press release template announcing a course, or a publication or conference presentation accomplishment. We ask them for an image, or their preferences from a group of images from the university's image bank. This allows us to seek and structure content that fits with the local university, college, and department requirements for brand and social media posts while also relying on our community to help in the effort.

Be On the Lookout for Change

We are cognizant that our advice will change as systems change; our key takeaway right now centers on the fact that despite the tremendous promise and importance of social media for branding and selling our graduate programs, it is not a magic bullet. Social media certainly has the ability to build and sustain community, but it's not super effective as an initial invitation to join that community. This might change in the future; right now we need to not only tell good, updated stories and useful, honest information for prospective students, but we need also to concentrate on the spaces where people conduct their searches and continue to predict their evaluative criteria through consistent surveys, checking in with new cohorts and undergraduates searching for programs. Our content strategy should continue to include viable information on our website and via email marketing, and our social media presence can be more focused on the content that helps potential students gather a sense of belonging and fit. Doing such work is neither fast nor possible in isolation. We've found that collaboration with the local community is key to telling our stories about our programs.

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Appendix

Graduate Recruitment Study

You are being invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Jen Almjeld and Dr. Angela Crow in the School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication at James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to examine digital communications with prospective students for recruitment purposes. We are exploring textual and visual strategies intended to accurately and responsibly attract and educate prospective writing studies graduate students.

This study will contribute to our graduate program's success and may also benefit other writing studies graduate and undergraduate programs at other universities.

This study has been approved by the IRB, protocol #24-4284.

The short survey should require no more than 20 minutes of your time.

By clicking the arrow below and completing the survey, you are giving your consent to participate.

If you have any questions about the study, please reach out to Dr. Almjeld at almjeljm@jmu.edu or Dr. Crow at crowad@jmu.edu.

To consent to participate in this study and to continue the survey, please click the arrow below.

1. How did you begin your search for a master's program? If you can't remember, how might you expect to search for a graduate program?

2. Check the criteria that were most relevant to you when beginning your search for a graduate program:

a. Location: I wanted to stay in this region of Virginia.

b. Location: I wanted to stay within a five-hour driving trip from my family home.

c. Location: I wanted to move to this region of the country because I hoped to find employment within one or two hours of JMU.

d. Program: I wanted to find a program that was focused on technical communication because I want to be a writer for specific industries: health, government, science, technology, etc.

e. Program: I wanted to find a program that was focused on writing studies because I hope to teach in either public schools or at a university.

f. Program: I wanted to find a master's program that would be my first graduate experience with a smaller number of students before pursuing a PhD in rhetoric and composition, technical communication or a similar field.

g. Size: I wanted to gain a master's degree at an institution that didn't offer an in-field PhD because I might receive more individual attention than at a larger PhD-granting university.

h. Other criteria. Please explain.

3. When starting your search, do you remember the strategies you used? (Check all that apply)

a. Looked for guides (Peterson's Guide or US News and World Report)

b. Signed up with online platforms that help prospective students find information

c. Developed a list of specific universities and explored their programs

d. Asked friends for their graduate program recommendations

e. Asked mentors for their graduate program recommendations

f. Sought graduate programs at JMU because I want to stay at the same school as my BA

g. Other. Please explain:

4. What keywords did or would you expect to use when seeking information about graduate education in writing studies? (Check all that apply)

a. State or region

b. Graduate program

c. Technical communication

d. Professional writing

e. Science writing

f. Teaching writing

g. Writing studies

h. Rhetoric and composition

i. Business writing

j. Other. Please explain:

5. When you applied for programs, did you request information about a program?

a. Yes

b. No

6. If yes, what kind of information did you receive from the program?

a. A series of direct emails

b. One email from X person, offering to meet with me

c. Information about informational meeting

d. Received no information from the program

e. Other. Please explain:

7. When you went to the web page to look at information about the specific courses in the program, what were you searching for? (Check all that apply)

a. Requirements for degree completion

b. Explanation of the sequence of courses and the curriculum

c. A sense of whether I was prepared to do well in the curriculum

d. A sense of how much of a background I would need in the discipline to enter and succeed

e. Other. Please explain:

8. When visiting web pages for potential graduate programs, what design features are most important to you? Please rank the top 3 from the list below by moving your top three answers to the top of the list.

a. Ease of navigation

b. Alignment with keywords from my search

c. Visual attractiveness of the space (more white space, less clutter, fewer colors, limited typefaces)

d. Layout that facilitated ease to find searched for content

e. Availability of accessible content (closed caption videos, ability to change font size, etc.)

f. Appropriate amount of information

g. Direct address to me as a user/consumer

h. Other. Please explain:

9. What sorts of artifacts / texts were useful to you or would you expect to be useful for prospective graduate students? (Check all that apply)

a. Program website

b. Direct email

c. Social media posts

d. Print brochures

e. Print direct correspondence

f. Other. Please explain:

10. How likely were you to link to social media accounts from a program's website or to search out that program's social media accounts? (rank from 0 or "Not at all likely" to 10 or "Extremely likely")

11. If you did link to a program's social media accounts, which platforms did you look at?

a. Facebook

b. Instagram

c. TikTok

d. LinkedIn

e. Other. Please explain:

12. If you did browse social media accounts, what were you looking to see?

13. Please rank the importance of information below for those considering graduate school. Rank up to 5 types of information in order by moving your top answers to the top of the list.

a. Cost / financial aid

b. Health and wellness resources

c. Mentoring support

d. Student groups

e. Opportunity for scholarships / assistantships

f. Employment rates of graduates

g. Length of program

h. Housing availability

i. Cost of living in the community

j. Information on surrounding community

k. Information on faculty (faculty research interest, access to faculty, etc.)

l. General information about students

m. Internship opportunities

n. Quality of research facilities

o. Career paths of program graduates

p. Other. Please explain:

14. Please rank how important (on a scale of 0-5) it was to you that a graduate program demonstrated the following aspects:

a. Rigor

b. Caring

c. Cost effectiveness

d. Diverse student population

e. Diverse faculty population

f. Diverse surrounding community

g. Job preparation

h. Information on alumni and their career paths

i. Other. Please explain:

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your response has been recorded.

Author Information

Angela Crow is an Associate Professor in the School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication at James Madison University. Her research is focused on freedom of movement in transportation infrastructure design decisions. She explores the role of influencers as they work to advocate for better transportation infrastructure/design in shifting social media venues. She teaches courses in web and app design, usability testing, content strategy for online venues, genre theory, and visual rhetoric.

Jen Almjeld is a Professor in the School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication at James Madison University. She served as director of the department's graduate program for six years and now serves as the program internship coordinator. Her research includes gender studies and girlhood, social media and community engagement. She teaches courses in feminist rhetorics, professional editing, research methods and writing in the community.

Understanding and Developing Programmatic Support for Doctoral Students

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Abstract In the field of rhetoric, composition, and technical communication, explicit guidance on selecting a well-fitting doctoral program is limited (Eaton, 2009), especially in technical and professional communication (TPC) programs. This study surveyed directors of 29 doctoral programs in TPC and related disciplines to identify structures and practices that convey student support, such as orientation, mentoring, funding, interdisciplinary opportunities, and community-building initiatives. Quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed that TPC-focused programs more often implement formal mentorship networks, interdisciplinary collaboration, and non-academic career preparation, whereas rhetoric/composition programs frequently rely on informal advising and emphasize academic career paths. Consistent with Lovitts (2001), transparency, strong community, and advising emerged as crucial to counter attrition risks, yet inadequate funding remains a widespread concern. The study highlights how clearer program communication and proactive inclusive practices can improve recruitment and "fit" for diverse doctoral applicants. In response to Romberger's (2025) call to enhance graduate program support, we offer recommendations for program directors to strengthen mentorship, resource allocation, and program visibility in TPC and beyond.

Keywords program fit, institutional support, graduate student mentoring, survey research, recruitment, technical and professional communication

Introduction

The process of professionalizing in academia is both complex and specific. Our field boasts a number of excellent works on professionalizing after a person is enrolled in a PhD program (Baliff, Davis, & Mountford, 2008; Ball, 2008; Brooks-Gillies et al. , 2020; Eble & Gaillet, 2004; Henschel and Melonçon, 2014; Pennell,

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Frost, & Getto, 2018), and we find many spaces in our field to be particularly attentive and responsive to the needs of graduate students (for example, the Computers and Writing Graduate Research Network is colloquially articulated as a "home" for many, the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing continues to make its conference registration free for graduate students, the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition offers a variety of mentoring and practice spaces for graduate students, etc.). However, we have not seen as much explicit discussion of how to arrive at a PhD program that fits, particularly in Technical and Professional Communication (TPC), where program structures and job market demands can differ from rhetoric and composition. As we (Mina and Erin) both from East Carolina University, talked about these questions in our first-year professional development seminar in spring 2024, we began to ask ourselves: What structures and practices do PhD programs in TPC (and related fields) use to signal student support? This led us to other questions. What practices do programs and their faculty engage in that are aimed at being helpful to prospective students in finding the right program? What practices do programs engage in that send the most effective signals to prospective students that current students are valued and supported, and how do these differ from rhetoric and composition programs? In Erin's experiences, a lot of this process is ad hoc; finding the right program is something that a student does on their own research, or this happens in faculty offices and hallways through recommendations and advising networks. We began to ask ourselves how we might reach students who are considering PhD programs and help them figure out ways to make data-driven decisions *in addition to* employing existing relationships as a way to "find the right fit." We also hope this article can be useful to TPC program administrators in thinking about what sorts of infrastructure are most important.

In short, we are writing primarily to program directors and faculty in TPC, with hopes that these readers will share what we've found with their master's-level students who are considering further graduate school. Our discussion is particularly relevant for TPC administrators who seek to improve program visibility and support structures for prospective doctoral students, many of whom come from rhetoric, composition, and writing studies backgrounds but (as our data shows) ultimately take faculty or industry positions in TPC. Students may be most interested in Appendix B, which offers specific questions to ask in order to make determinations about program fit. Program directors and advisors will likely also be interested in the discussion section of this piece; though, we hope the following brief review of literature as well as our methods section will also prove useful. We begin with a brief overview of existing work, noting that doctoral-level research on TPC programs remains a growing area. We then move into our methods for adding to the knowledge of the field, which include the development and delivery of a survey of program directors (approved by our local Institutional Review Board as an exempt study: UMCIRB 24-000221). Finally, we overview our survey results, and we end with a synthesized discussion and recommendations.

Existing Work

Beyond TPC, broader studies on doctoral education provide insights into the structural and institutional factors influencing student experiences. Barbara Lovitts (2001) notes several prominent reasons that "non-completers" give for leaving their doctoral programs: lack of information, the absence of community, disappointment with the learning experience, and poor quality in the adviser-advisee relationship. Each of these reasons provides us a way to counterbalance attrition: transparency, community, rich and inclusive learning contexts, and strong advising relationships. All of this, though, must occur in the larger context of the modern academy. More recently, the Australian-based Alison Lee and Susan Danby (2012) track the evolution of doctoral education over recent decades, noting enrollment pressures as well as shifts to more apprentice-style teaching (particularly with laboratory-based work). They also surface an emphasis on the local context, which likely runs through many doctoral programs including their own discipline of education as well as ours in rhetoric/composition/technical communication. That is, every doctoral program is shaped not only by its home field but also by pressures and opportunities that are unique to local institutions.

Yet, even within TPC programs, there is ongoing tension between academic and industry pathways. Rachell Hayes (2023) argues that professional and technical writing programs often struggle to balance rhetorical theory with workplace preparation, leading to gaps in graduate preparedness. She writes, "While I continued to teach, I also worked for several prominent employers…who would make demands on me as a professional and technical writer, documentation specialist, or business systems analyst which completely exceeded my education" (p. 16). This disconnects between curriculum and professional demands underscores the need for greater institutional transparency about career outcomes for doctoral students. Also, she mentions one of the most persistent issues in TPC doctoral education is the disconnect between academia and industry. Hayes (2023) critiques the lack of practical preparation in graduate education, stating that "none of the teachers currently working in the graduate program have ever worked as technical writers" (p. 16). The recruitment of PhD students in TPC remains a challenge, partly due to the disciplinary identity of the field. Carolyn Rude and Kelli Cargile Cook's (2004) analysis of the academic job market in TPC reveals that only 29% of the jobs listing technical or professional communication as a primary specialization were actually filled by graduates of doctoral programs in the field. The authors warn that this "significant gap between the demand for faculty prepared as specialists in technical and professional communication and the available PhDs in the field" creates instability (p. 70).

Additionally, institutions hiring for TPC positions sometimes prioritize candidates with generalist backgrounds in English studies, rather than those with specialized technical communication expertise (Rude & Cargile Cook, 2004). Those candidates, once in their positions, can then be tapped for multiple needs within a department. This contributes to a cycle where doctoral programs in TPC struggle to grow, as prospective students may (erroneously) perceive limited academic job prospects. Meanwhile, the field's ties to industry-oriented careers create further complications, as doctoral students must decide whether to pursue academic or industry paths, each of which requires different skill sets and professional networks.

Inadequate program visibility is another critical issue in doctoral recruitment. Angela Eaton (2009) highlights the lack of clarity in how TPC PhD programs define their missions, stating that "applicants don't realize just how much emphasis is placed on acquiring research methods and producing research studies in the PhD" (p. 4). She notes that many PhD students enter programs expecting a balance between research and teaching but soon discover that tenure-track positions require a significant focus on traditional scholarly production (p. 4). This lack of clear communication contributes to misaligned expectations, which can lead to attrition.

Furthermore, recruitment strategies often fail to reach diverse applicant pools. The Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) conference proceedings from 2007 discuss the need for programs to develop stronger web presences and better digital recruitment strategies to attract students from varied backgrounds. Given that TPC is an interdisciplinary field with connections to engineering, computer science, and business, improving program visibility and outreach is crucial for attracting students who may not traditionally consider PhDs in writing studies. While existing resources provide foundational insights into TPC doctoral programs, there is a clear need for more studies focusing on how prospective students navigate program selection and how institutions can enhance transparency and support throughout the admissions process. By addressing these areas, TPC programs can improve recruitment, retention, and the overall success of their doctoral candidates.

However, scholarly conversations about how prospective doctoral students, especially in TPC, navigate program selection and how institutions can improve transparency in admissions are still limited. At the same time, many graduates from rhetoric, composition, and writing studies programs go on to become full-time faculty in TPC, which makes it even more important for programs to communicate their structures, expectations, and career pathways clearly. Instead of leaving students to figure things out on their own, programs can take a more intentional approach to recruitment and outreach. By doing so, they can help prospective students, many of whom may not have originally trained in TPC, understand how these programs align with their academic and professional goals. Strengthening this conversation can lead to more transparency, better support for students, and a stronger pipeline of scholars and practitioners in the field.

Jim Ridolfo's (2024) RhetMap project, available at rhetmap.org, provides a survey of information for program-seekers (as well as job-seekers at the end of their programs), and Lisa Melonçon's (2014, 2019) articles on technical communication programs are useful for understanding longer-term strengths of particular locations (e.g., identifying places where these mentoring cultures exist even if that location does not have an in-field doctoral program). Michelle F. Eble's (2020) findings on mentoring models highlights the need to focus on inclusion and transdisciplinary work. And Julia Romberger's recent work in her 2025 Programmatic Perspectives piece focuses on the perspectives of students in Old Dominion University's largely online PhD program and provides a new way of looking at the issue of fit after a student has matriculated. Her article, which also draws on a survey of student perspectives, advances the PARS model, asking program directors to be Personal, Accessible, Responsive, and Strategic. Romberger argues that we need to "create better transitions through mentoring and robust documentation and better professionalization at the national level" (p. 47) and that our professional organizations and journals play a pivotal role in sponsoring this conversation. We aim here to respond to and support her call.

Methods: Survey Structure, Setup, Distribution

We developed a survey in Qualtrics that was designed to help us understand what practices PhD programs in TPC and adjacent fields such as rhetoric, writing and composition are currently using to support their students (both prospective and current). We targeted PhD program administrators as the intended recipients/respondents of this survey since they are most likely to have the big-picture view we were looking for that would include a sense of all/most of the existing infrastructure in PhD programs; although, we also made space for other interested faculty to respond given the distributed networks that are sometimes that reality of program administration. To think systematically about this audience, we used the CCCC Doctoral Consortium in Rhetoric and Composition's members list. We initially sent the survey to this list February 20, 2024, with a March 4 follow-up after some messages bounced back, and we researched updated information for some program directors. While we received some responses to this initial set of inquiries, RhetMap's listing of 94 doctoral programs with some rhetoric/composition component suggested that we would need additional responses in order to be able to extrapolate meaningfully. We then sent our survey to the CPTSC listserv on March 21, 2024, reasoning that this space included many people who are interested in programmatic-level thinking. We ultimately received 29 responses, with varying levels of completion/detail, representing at least eight discrete universities.[1] Of these, 11 were fully completed, while 18 were partially completed (i.e., some sections were left blank). We retained all responses in our analysis, ensuring that even partial responses contributed valuable insights to our findings. However, in cases where a respondent left key sections blank, those omissions were noted in our interpretations.

Since our primary focus is on TPC doctoral programs, we separated responses from TPC programs and those from rhetoric, writing, and composition programs to analyze how they compare. This distinction allows us to examine how TPC programs conceptualize student support in relation to professional development pathways, recruitment efforts, and doctoral student expectations, and whether their approaches align with or diverge from those in related fields. By making this comparison, we aim to identify discipline-specific practices and highlight areas where TPC programs might strengthen their support for prospective and current doctoral students.

The survey was designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative results (Appendix A). Each question that focused on a particular characteristic or kind of support offered a variety of responses that participants could select. These potential responses were generated from our knowledge of existing infrastructures in PhD programs. Mina, having just researched and applied to many PhD programs in 2022-23, had a keen awareness of what programs are offering, and Erin, having served as PhD program coordinator for almost 4 years, had a sense of what the current research on professional development suggests programs should offer as well as what local students say they value (Blackmon, 2024). In addition to the suggested responses, each multiple-selection question also includes an "other" choice with text entry enabled. Additionally, after each of these multiple selection questions, an optional open-ended question provides a space to say more about that particular characteristic or kind of support. Thus, we aimed for and succeeded in obtaining, both quantitative and qualitative data to help us think through the existing ways programs support their students.

[1] While we provided a space to identify the university, we did not require a response to this question and most people elected not to fill it out. Represented in our results are: East Carolina University, Michigan State University, the University of Houston, Old Dominion University, University of Central Florida, University of Cincinnati, University of Memphis, and University of Wisconsin-Madison, among others.

Our survey was born, of course, of our own experiences. The questions were inspired from Mina's recent PhD application experience. Mina used the list of members on CCCC consortium to find the right fit in TPC starting the process in 2022. This process highlighted the difficulty of assessing program fit based on publicly available information. Specific concerns, such as the extent of faculty mentorship, the availability of interdisciplinary opportunities, and the predictability of funding, shaped how we structured our questions. By incorporating these insights, we aimed to capture the institutional practices that most impact student decision-making.

Survey Results

This section organizes the survey findings based on key themes, reporting both quantitative and qualitative data. We address all responses for each question in order to put the responses into conversation with one another. It's worth noting that our survey allowed, but did not require, qualitative responses associated with each question.

Quantitative Results

This section presents the quantitative results of our survey. Here, we have provided the results of our survey's content questions—organized into sub-sections on opportunities and activities, mentoring and advising; funding; interdisciplinary collaboration; professional development; community; alumni placement; accommodating research interests; quality of life; and diversity, equity, and inclusion—without associating this data with identifiers. The exact presentation of survey questions is available in Appendix A. Questions that presented participants with Likert-style responses are summarized in prose. Questions that asked participants to "choose all that apply" are represented with bar charts. Our quantitative results provide a useful overview of all survey responses. Each of the following sub-sections correlates directly with a section in the qualitative results section that follows.

Opportunities and Activities

Figure 1 shows the results of a question asking participants to "choose all that apply" in terms of activities sponsored by the doctoral program they work with. Orientation and financial support for conference travel were the most common. "Other" responses included co-authoring publications, summer funding, works in progress groups, dissertation writing class, formal job market prep class for academic and non-academic jobs, research colloquium during which students present their work, editorial positions, administrative experience in the writing program, first-year review and second-year conference.

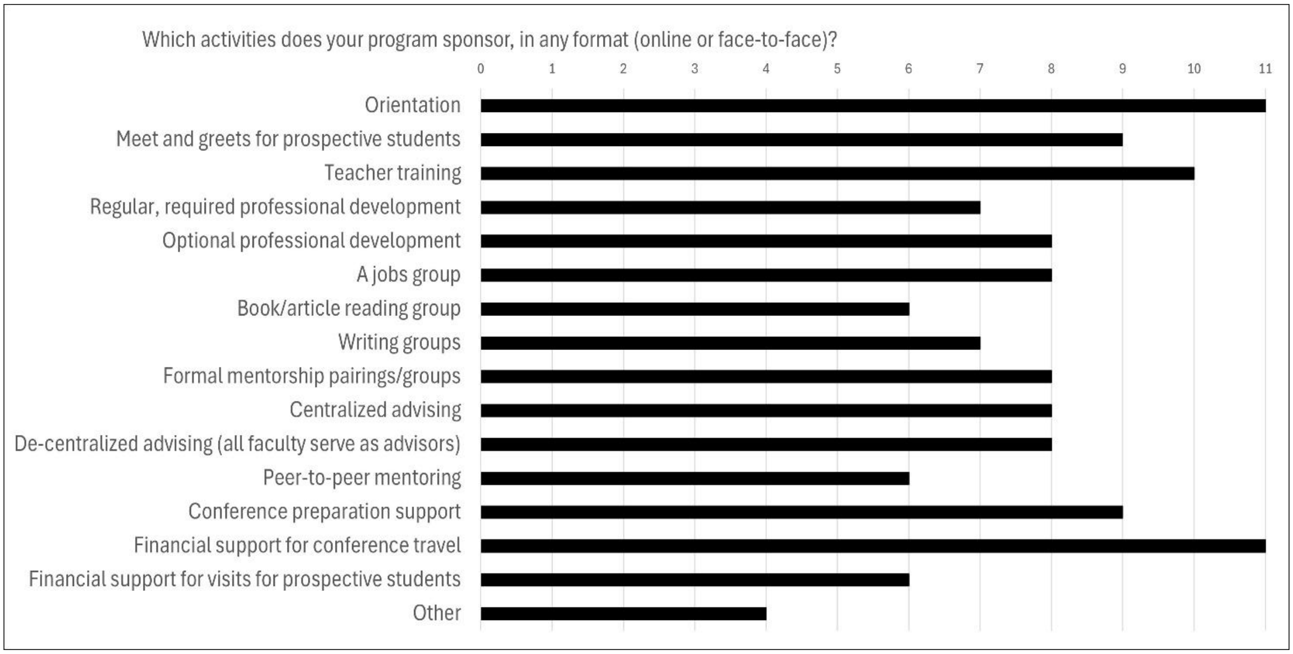

Figure 1. Activities reported across all programs.

In terms of research opportunities for students, most programs (five) indicated moderate support, with four indicated limited support and two indicating extensive support.

Mentoring and Advising

In terms of the kind of mentorship and advisory support the PhD students receive in the programs, seven programs indicated that they have robust mentorship and advisory systems. three programs mentioned there is adequate support with room for improvement with one indicating there is limited mentorship and advisory structure.

Funding

In terms of the funding opportunities, scholarships, or grants that are available to support PhD students in the programs, four programs mentioned diverse funding options and competitive scholarships with four programs indicating some funding opportunities and scholarships and three programs indicating limited financial support.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

In terms of the available opportunities on interdisciplinary collaboration for students, five programs indicated there is strong emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration with four programs indicating moderate support for interdisciplinary projects and two mentioned there are limited opportunities for interdisciplinary work.

Professional Development

In terms of the professional development programs or workshops offered to students to enhance their skills, six indicated comprehensive professional development programs; four mentioned there are some professional development opportunities, and one program indicated limited professional development support.

Community

In terms of the sense of community among students within the programs, five indicated there is strong and supportive community; five indicated Moderate sense of community with one program indicating limited community engagement.

Alumni Placement

In terms of the success rate of their alumni, nine indicated high success in securing academic positions or industry roles, and two indicated moderate success in post-PhD placements. No respondents chose "limited success" or "not applicable."

Accommodating Research Interests

In terms of how flexible the programs function in accommodating the diverse research interests of students, nine respondents indicated high flexibility, with tailored options for individual research goals. Two respondents indicated limited flexibility in accommodating diverse research interests. No one selected the moderate category.

Quality of Life

In terms of the alignment of the provided stipend with the living expenses in the region, zero programs indicated the stipend is more than sufficient to cover living expenses; six indicated stipend covers basic living expenses with some room for improvement, and four indicated the stipend may not adequately cover essential living expenses.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Figure 2 shows how participants reported the ways their programs pursue diversity and equity. "Other" responses included statements that state legislatures do not allow these things to be visible as well as details about how well faculty represent, or do not represent, student populations.

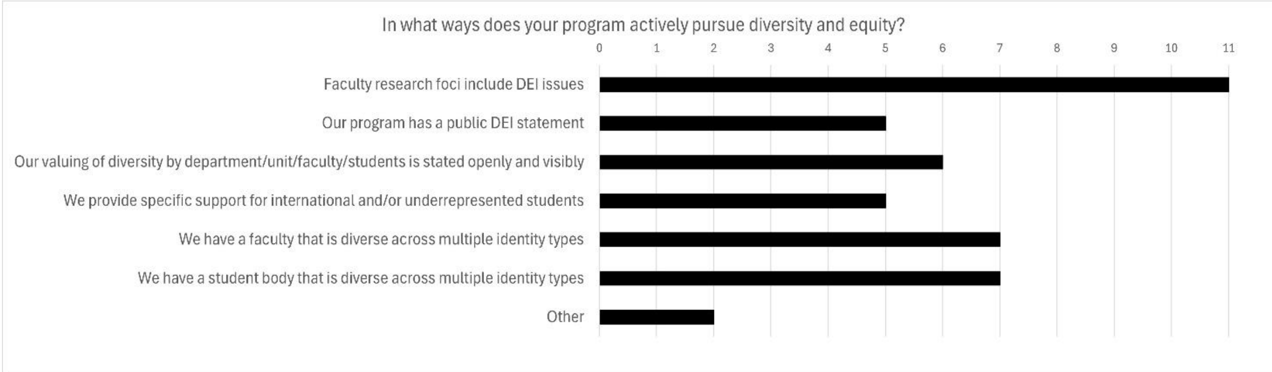

Figure 2. DEI support reported across all programs.

Qualitative Results

This section is organized directly around the questions we asked in our survey; as such, the following sub-sections correspond both to survey questions and to the organization of the quantitative results presented above.

To provide a more meaningful qualitative analysis, we sub-categorized responses into TPC and non-TPC programs. TPC programs, in this instance, include any responses where the participant selected "technical communication" in response to Question #2 ("With which fields is your program significantly aligned?"), even if they also checked other disciplines as important to their program. Non-TPC program responses, for our purposes, are those associated with a response set where the participant did not check "technical communication" in response to Question #2. It is important to note that our term "non-TPC programs" signifies that a respondent did not identify TPC as central to their program; it does not signify that TPC is wholly absent at all. In fact, based on the response sets when answers are correlated by participant, we would argue that almost all programs represented do have a TPC presence. The identification herein as "TPC" or "non-TPC" is a matter of the particular respondents' perception of TPC as central, or not, to their program's structure.

We aim to identify patterns associated with a significant/central TPC presence, even if a program includes other disciplines. This distinction allows for a more direct engagement with TPC doctoral programs while also incorporating relevant insights from adjacent disciplines and allowing those adjacent disciplines to act as an informal sort of control or comparison mechanism. Thus, the following sub-sections provide a synthesized understanding of the survey's qualitative results and their relationships. As above, the sections that follow are opportunities and activities, mentoring and advising; funding; interdisciplinary collaboration; professional development; community; alumni placement; accommodating research interests; quality of life; and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Opportunities and Activities

In terms of what activities a program sponsors, we found evidence of significant existing infrastructure. Most of the structures our survey anticipated in its response choices were indeed present in many programs. Among the four "other" responses, program directors reported co-authoring opportunities, research and summer funding, a works-in-progress group, a dissertation-writing class, a formal job market prep class for academic and non-academic jobs, a research colloquium during which students present their work, opportunities to take on various editorial positions, opportunities to gain administrative experience in the writing program and elsewhere, and multiple types of regular review and check-in processes.

TPC programs reported a strong emphasis on professional and research-based activities, often tied to editorial work, administrative experience, and applied research collaborations. One respondent detailed a multifaceted infrastructure designed to foster both academic and non-academic career paths: *"Students have opportunities to take on various editorial positions, gain administrative experience in the writing program, and participate in a research colloquium where they present their work."* Another TPC respondent highlighted formalized job market preparation by saying, *"We have a dissertation-writing class and a formal job market prep course for both academic and non-academic jobs."* This distinction is particularly relevant to TPC, as graduates often pursue careers in industry, government, and professional communication roles, in addition to tenure-track positions. Respondents also reported structured funding opportunities for research and conference participation: *"We provide research and summer funding, and there are matching funds for conducting research available from the College & Graduate School."* This suggests that while funding is present, it is not likely enough to cover all the costs of

Non-TPC programs reported many of the same structural opportunities, though they tended to focus more on traditional academic pathways rather than applied professionalization experiences. One respondent described a strong internal review and mentorship process: *"We have multiple types of regular review and check-in processes, including works-in-progress groups and faculty-led mentoring sessions."* While this structure provides consistent academic support, it does not emphasize external research collaborations or non-academic career pathways as frequently as TPC programs. Another respondent noted a greater reliance on informal networking rather than structured job market preparation: *"We encourage students to co-author with faculty, but there is no formal job market prep class."*

Funding disparities also emerged, with some non-TPC respondents highlighting financial constraints that limit research opportunities: *"It's not enough money to* *acclimate to expensive major conferences."* This reinforces a broader issue within doctoral education—the availability of research support is uneven across institutions, and students often struggle to secure sufficient funding for conference travel and professional development.

Mentoring and Advising

Mentoring and advising structures differ between TPC and non-TPC doctoral programs, with varying levels of formalized mentorship, advising models, and professional development opportunities. While most programs reported some form of structured mentorship, the depth and scope of support varied significantly. Most TPC programs described a robust and multi-layered mentorship model, emphasizing both formal advising structures and peer/colleague mentorship opportunities. One respondent described a comprehensive, structured mentorship system and said, *"Each student is mentored by the Director their first year. After that, they have a chair and full committee. They also have mentors across their research projects and GAships."* Additionally, some TPC programs incorporate mentorship into professional development initiatives, offering structured programming such as: *"We have a multifaceted professional development support program called our 'CAP' (Collaborative Academic Professionalization). Cohorts of students progress through the program, which involves weekly meetings and workshops. Grad students can also apply to serve as assistant directors of our writing center and the first-year writing program."* Responses in this section showed that mentorship in TPC programs extends beyond traditional advising and into structured professionalization efforts, helping students gain administrative and leadership experience. Some TPC programs also focus on flexibility in mentorship, allowing students to transition between advisors or work with multiple faculty members based on evolving research interests: *"Each student is provided a faculty mentor who may continue as prelim advisor and then dissertation advisor. A faculty member serves as the academic advisor for all students in coursework."* A focus on consistent guidance and the ability to adapt mentorship experiences with evolving goals was apparent in these responses.

Non-TPC programs also reported mentorship and advising structures, though with some variations in depth and formalization. Some respondents highlighted traditional faculty advising models, where a single primary advisor plays the central role: *"Each student is assigned a faculty mentor at the start of the program, who typically becomes their dissertation chair."* In contrast to structured professionalization programs seen in TPC programs, non-TPC programs tended to offer less formalized mentorship opportunities outside traditional advising roles. One respondent noted: *"Our mentoring is primarily informal. Students connect with faculty based on research interests, but there is no formalized mentoring beyond* *dissertation advising."* This response and others suggested a less systematic approach.

Another respondent pointed out the uneven quality of mentorship across faculty members: *"Mentoring depends a lot on the faculty member. Some are very engaged, while others are hands-off."* This indicates that while mentorship is available, it may not be equally distributed or consistently structured across all faculty members.

Funding

TPC Programs offered funding through teaching assistantships, research assistantships, and conference travel support. One participant noted: *"Most of our students are self-funded because they are at a distance. We have 12 assistantships available to us for on-campus students."* This highlights potential disparities in funding for distance-learning students compared to their on-campus counterparts.

Non-TPC Programs had more structured funding but noted competition for resources. One respondent stated: *"We have regular funding available as part of a recurring budget allocation tied to cohort size, allowing us to distribute research enhancement funds over four to five years."* This suggests a planned funding strategy, though access to additional grants may be selective.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

TPC programs actively engaged with interdisciplinary fields such as digital humanities, health communication, and experience architecture. One respondent shared: *"Our faculty regularly collaborate with the College of Engineering and the School of Public Health, allowing students to engage in interdisciplinary projects."* Responses in this section suggest that interdisciplinary engagement is common and well-supported.

While non-TPC programs largely seemed to encourage coursework outside the primary discipline, respondents also noted challenges. A participant mentioned: *"Students are required to complete coursework outside their department, but collaboration across disciplines is not always institutionally supported."* Responses showed that while interdisciplinary study is promoted across all programs represented in this sample, more pronounced institutional barriers may exist in programs that already have a broader focus.

Professional Development

TPC programs emphasized structured professionalization through workshops, mentorship groups, and research initiatives. One respondent described: *"We have a* *professional development support program called our 'CAP' (Collaborative Academic Professionalization), which involves weekly meetings and workshops."* Other responses also suggested a strong focus on long-term academic and career growth.

Non-TPC programs prioritized teaching development but offered fewer built-in, research-focused mentorship programs. One respondent explained: *"We have a yearly teaching conference where graduate TAs are invited to present and share insights."* While teaching preparation is emphasized, structured research mentorship appears less prominent in this response set.

Community

Many TPC programs reported strong, structured efforts to build a supportive graduate student community, often through formalized events, networking opportunities, and ongoing social gatherings. One respondent noted: *"We typically hold a get-together to welcome new PhD students and encourage them to meet existing PhD students. Also, we have a graduate student organization that holds events."* Intentional onboarding and networking opportunities in these responses were identified as helping students integrate into program cultures. Some programs also emphasize professional and academic community-building, ensuring that students engage with faculty, peers, and broader research networks: *"We hold a research colloquium in Fall for faculty and PhD candidates to share their work, ignite talks in the Spring, and monthly events for students to work on projects in a shared space with faculty available as needed."* Another key theme in TPC programs was the effort to integrate both in-person and distance-learning students into a cohesive community: *"Our program hosts virtual events for distance students so they can engage with faculty and peers. We also pair incoming students with peer mentors to help them adjust."* This recognition of the different needs of on-campus and remote students reflects a proactive approach to fostering inclusivity in program culture.

However, some TPC programs also highlighted challenges in faculty-student engagement, particularly regarding maintaining consistent faculty involvement in social and academic community-building: *"Community among students is strong, but the community between students and faculty is weaker."* While student engagement appears robust across this response set, data indicates that faculty participation in program-wide social and professionalization events may vary.

In contrast, community-building efforts in non-TPC programs varied more widely, with some programs actively fostering engagement while others reported more passive or inconsistent efforts. Some non-TPC programs described initiatives similar to those in TPC programs, such as informal networking events and academic gatherings: *"We have a graduate student association that organizes social and academic events throughout the year."* However, other programs reported weaker engagement structures or challenges in creating a sense of belonging, particularly among students from underrepresented backgrounds: *"The climate in the workplace prohibits some from wanting to attend these events. At the beginning of the semester and end of the semester is not enough."* Responses showed how external factors—such as institutional culture and faculty-student dynamics—can affect students' willingness to participate in community-building activities.

Some non-TPC programs also noted that COVID-19 had lasting effects on their ability to rebuild in-person engagement, leading to an increased reliance on virtual platforms: *"Student Discord chat has helped mitigate lack of face-to-face interactions since COVID, but this is something students have struggled with."* Responses showed adaptation but also that students may still feel disconnected from their peers and faculty in hybrid or remote settings. Despite occasional tensions, another respondent observed that "*over the last twenty years, [community] has been mostly strong. Occasionally there are tensions among groups, but in general the students are there for one another and the atmosphere among the majority of folks is very positive*." Various programs also emphasized regular informal and formal social events. One respondent mentioned "*weekly or monthly meet-ups; lectures or other academic events specifically for the program*." Other activities mentioned included group advising and various kinds of regular social events.

Alumni Placement

Placement information and examples of successful outcomes from PhD programs reveal a mix of positive achievements and critical perspectives on institutional pressures. TPC programs had a mix of academic and industry placements. One respondent highlighted: *"Many of our graduates are in leadership roles in the field now, and others have gone into usability consulting and technical communication roles in industry."* This demonstrates the breadth of career pathways for TPC graduates, which we mentioned in our introduction as well. Non-TPC programs reported high academic placement rates but fewer industry transitions. One participant stated: *"The majority of our graduates secure tenure-track positions at research institutions or community colleges."* Overall results show strong academic placement but less emphasis on non-academic careers.

Accommodating Research Interests

TPC Programs generally provided high flexibility, allowing students to tailor their coursework and research approaches to fit their professional and academic goals. One respondent shared: *"We have updated our graduate curriculum to give PhD students more choices in their coursework."* Intentional efforts to accommodate a range of research interests by expanding curricular options were apparent in several responses. Additionally, some TPC programs encouraged alternative forms of research outputs beyond traditional dissertations. A participant explained:

“We've had students produce films, digital/interactive sites/apps, installations, and various other outcomes. We encourage our students to innovate and reward them for doing so.” Some programs also allowed students to create custom concentrations that aligned with their unique research trajectories. One respondent stated: *"Students can propose a custom concentration to suit their research interests in the PhD program.”*

Non-TPC Programs also accommodated diverse research interests but often through preset disciplinary pathways rather than individually tailored concentrations. One participant noted: *“We have multiple disciplinary pathways that students can choose from, but they are predefined.”* Some non-TPC programs reported a strong emphasis on traditional dissertation formats rather than alternative research outputs. One respondent observed: *"While digital work is allowed, most students complete standard dissertation projects."* This suggests that non-TPC programs may be slower to adopt multimodal research approaches compared to TPC programs, which actively encourage diverse scholarly outputs.

Quality of Life

The financial realities of doctoral programs, particularly stipends and cost-of-living alignment, play a significant role in the quality of life for students. Across both TPC and non-TPC programs, respondents highlighted financial challenges, with many indicating that stipends were insufficient to fully cover living expenses. However, some differences emerged in how programs addressed these challenges.

Many TPC programs reported institutional awareness of financial struggles and efforts to improve funding structures. One respondent explained: *"Our students have their own union and they are currently in bargaining. They received substantial raises in the past, but in this economy, it's difficult for everyone. We are looking into other ways to support our students during their time with us."* This response highlights an apparent thread of ongoing advocacy efforts within TPC programs to improve funding conditions for graduate students. Additionally, some TPC programs mentioned structured funding models that provide financial support beyond assistantships: *“We have seen some improvement of late, but we are always trying to keep up with rising costs of housing, in particular, as well as to keep things equitable for students who are coming to the program with dependents to care for.”* This response set shows that TPC programs are proactively working on equity-based financial support, but stipends remain a major concern across programs. One TPC respondent noted: *“Our stipend is high nationally, but so is our cost of living."* This reflects a common struggle in TPC programs—even when stipends are comparatively competitive, they do not always keep pace with local economic conditions.

Non-TPC programs reported similar financial constraints, though there was less mention of structured advocacy efforts to improve funding conditions. One respondent stated: *"This is a fight every [graduate program director] at our university is having with upper admin and has been for quite some time."* Some non-TPC respondents also described graduate students needing additional jobs to make ends meet: *"Students are poor and often hold other jobs."* This response, while blunt, captures a common financial reality for doctoral students across fields. Additionally, administrative challenges were noted more frequently in non-TPC programs. One respondent described their efforts to increase stipends as an "*uphill battle with administration*," implying institutional resistance to increasing financial support.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

These responses indicate the status of explicit DEI initiatives at the time of our survey in early 2024. As we continued work on the article in early 2025, our own university has been scrubbing mention of DEI from external documents (including course catalogs), and it's likely that other institutions are also seeing major shifts in the wake of various presidential executive orders and the uncertainty surrounding their implementation.

TPC programs demonstrated a commitment to integrating DEI into research, curriculum, and structural support initiatives. One respondent emphasized faculty involvement: "*We have a diverse faculty, but we do not have enough Black faculty for me to feel comfortable saying that. While we have representatives from the LGBTQ, Indigenous, Jewish, and Latino communities, we lack representation that mirrors our student population."* Several TPC programs also foregrounded inclusive pedagogical practices and research initiatives: *"We are now foregrounding translingual writing in our classes."* Institutional policies and external constraints also played a role in shaping DEI efforts. Some TPC respondents noted the impact of state policies on public DEI statements and funding: *"We are in [a state where] our ability to publicly state support for DEI or spend funds on it has to be framed very carefully; recent state-level hostility to DEI has negatively affected our efforts to recruit marginalized students and faculty."* Moreover, TPC programs often linked DEI to structural programmatic changes, including financial support and recruitment strategies: *"We have actively sought to transform the field by providing opportunities and pathways for members of underrepresented groups to succeed in our program. This work will never be finished as it is a multi-generational transformation."* Other responses also suggested long-term commitment to systemic change rather than temporary, performative DEI efforts.

Non-TPC programs expressed similar commitments to DEI, though their efforts often appeared more institutional than programmatic. One respondent noted: *"Creating more structures within the department including committees that* *specifically support DEI work."* While this highlights departmental engagement with DEI, it suggests that some non-TPC programs rely more on committee-driven approaches rather than curriculum-wide or faculty-driven initiatives. Another respondent discussed the challenges of accessibility in learning environments: *"Accessibility in our learning spaces is probably our biggest initiative university-wide just now with multiple trainings happening at dept and university level."* Other responses also demonstrated broad institutional commitments to accessibility, diversity, and equity, though it is unclear how much autonomy individual programs have in shaping these initiatives.

Many programs mentioned financial and recruitment-based DEI strategies. One non-TPC respondent noted: *"We leverage funds to enhance stipends for underrepresented students."* State and institutional policies were also a major challenge for programs across the board: *"State legislature does not allow us to state visibly [that we support DEI]."*

Discussion and Recommendations

In this discussion that follows, we highlight notable elements of the results offered above and we offer some specific recommendations that we see as most exigent. Perhaps the most notable element of the data discussed above is the general feeling that programs in our field are doing well. In almost every area, we see a range of responses from program directors, all contextualized with local variables in the qualitative data. For example, in opportunities and activities, we see that qualitative responses suggested an integration of research, administration, and publication experience**,** which aligns with the applied and interdisciplinary nature of the fields represented here. Some responses in this area also suggested that many programs, perhaps especially those *without* a strong TPC focus, rely on organic mentorship rather than structured planning to prepare students for post-graduate careers**.** This pattern suggests that programs with less of a TPC focus might look to those with more central TPC tenets for ideas on creating additional formal mentoring structures.

Similarities across programs showed up in the area of mentoring and advising, with evidence of a lot of structured approaches that ensure continuity of support across different academic and research stages. As shown in the qualitative results above, some TPC programs have structures that ensure students receive guidance not just from one advisor but from multiple faculty members and peers. Meanwhile non-TPC programs tended toward structures that are both less formalized and also more reliant on a single mentor. While effective in ensuring one-on-one mentorship, this model may lack the breadth of collaborative mentoring structures found in TPC programs and may lend itself to replication models of mentorship (Eble, 2020; Eble

& Gaillet, 2019). Less systematic approaches may work well for self-directed students but could leave others seeking more structured support.

Our results related to community building suggest an understanding that hybrid models of social and academic engagement mirror the way students build both scholarly networks and personal connections, strengthening their overall experience. Many programs provided results showing their infrastructures seek to emulate professional networking practices. Notably, we could see trends in how faculty involvement may vary depending on program focus and size, potentially limiting mentorship and collaborative opportunities outside of formal advising structures.

Those mentoring structures likely have connections to career outcomes, and our data shows a clear difference in how programs with a central TPC focus think more broadly about career pathways for their graduates. TPC-oriented programs tend to encourage and support multimodal and alternative approaches to dissertation work, which aligns with the evolving nature of TPC as a field that integrates digital and technical communication. Non-TPC program responses showed that, while alternative approaches tend to be accommodated, they may not receive as much support and students may have less agency in designing their own academic trajectory. This seems likely appropriate to the slight differences in program goals but is worth noting in a rapidly changing academic landscape.

The one outlier area that doesn’t demonstrate confidence in the strength and health of programs represented in this data set—and thus an area that we want to spend some time with—is the stipend provided to students on assistantship. Not a single program indicated that the stipend would do more than cover living expenses. Based on our personal experiences, we were actually surprised to see six people responding that stipends cover living expenses. The possible mismatch between faculty perception and student experience here represents a need for more primary research on student perspectives on the issue of funding.

Regardless of the degree to which official funding is not sufficient, students in our field do not have the financial support to attend conferences or procure other professional development unless support is provided directly or they have outside support. But, more than that, this financial reality may contribute to a sense of “putting life on hold” while in graduate school. Research on TPC programmatic structures supports these concerns, as faculty in the field have consistently reported difficulties in securing sufficient funding and administrative resources for graduate programs (Maylath, Grabill, & Gurak, 2010). From a humanist perspective, asking prospective students to “put life on hold” is not a great thing to do to people, and from a more utilitarian perspective, it will mean some people do not pursue this path and our field thus misses out on their contributions. It is also notable that graduate assistantships in other fields (especially the sciences) tend to have higher salaries, which means we may lose students to fields they see as more lucrative. In viewing our survey results, we noted that programs do not seem to have a fixed approach in terms of funding packages offered to applicants. We also know that it is possible for an applicant with multiple offers to negotiate at some (but likely not all) institutions. Colloquially, we mostly hear about students having a hard time navigating their expenses with the stipend offered. Perhaps one of the most effective strategies for program directors to advocate to upper administration for higher stipends is by using tools that offer comparisons to peer institutions, like Will Chesher and Logan Clem's (2024) CompRhet Money Map. Table 1 offers a breakdown of our key takeaways as we worked to differentiate the approaches of programs with strong TPC foci.

Category	TPC Programs	Non-TPC Programs	Key Takeaways
Funding & Stipends	Often underfunded, limited travel and research funding	Generally underfunded but slightly more varied in external grant support	Need for more competitive funding to retain students and attract diverse applicants
Administrative Structure	Increasingly independent from English departments	More entrenched in traditional humanities structures	Structural autonomy seems to facilitate program growth and adaptability
Professionalization	Strong emphasis on workplace connections, industry partnerships, internships	More focused on academic career paths, with limited industry engagement	TPC programs excel in preparing students for diverse careers, while non-TPC programs often lack robust non-academic career preparation
Curricular Flexibility	More adaptable to industry trends, including digital media and UX	More focused on traditional coursework and academic research	TPC programs benefit from interdisciplinary approaches, whereas non-TPC programs may struggle with curricular rigidity
Research Priorities	Focused on digital literacies, UX, writing technologies, workplace communication	Primarily focused on rhetorical theory, pedagogy, and literary analysis	Bridging the gap between research priorities could enhance interdisciplinary collaboration

Social Integration & Retention	Strong emphasis on mentorship and networking	Mixed—some programs cultivate strong communities, while others lack structured support	Social and academic integration are key to retention across all disciplines

Table 1. Key takeaways in a comparison of responses between programs with an identified/significant TPC focus and those without.

One element that was uniform across all types of responses was that external political climates constrain DEI initiatives and, similarly, employment prospects. Multiple states have recently experienced legislative restrictions on how they can talk about and enact diversity and inclusivity oriented programs. For programs whose content explicitly includes DEI work, this is especially tricky. This could be the subject of an entire article and falls beyond the scope of our work here, except to say that programs should be having conversations about how to proactively manage such initiatives and restrictions in a constantly changing national landscape of surveillance.

One program had two different respondents: the program director and an associate dean from the graduate school. Their responses were remarkably aligned both qualitatively and quantitatively, suggesting (we hope)that faculty in our fields are in tune with one another about what their programs offer and how they stack up. The only two quantitative differences were on *community* and *research support*, with the dean saying they have a strong and supportive community and moderate support for research initiatives, and the current program director saying they have a moderate sense of community and extensive research funding and resources. The program director's qualitative response focused on recent years, while the dean discussed a span of two decades and acknowledged, "*Occasionally there are tensions among groups, but in general the students are there for one another and the atmosphere among the majority of folks is very positive*." The research responses were remarkably similar in their qualitative discussion of research opportunities; the dean (who rated research opportunities lower) additionally mentioned matching funds from the college and graduate school. This perhaps highlights that our questions were purposely a bit vague, aimed at gauging faculty's sense of relative strengths. We suspect that the program director was weighing their research opportunities against those of other programs, while the dean was weighing them against what he wished existed. Altogether, we found this set of responses especially instructive because it shows that faculty have a strongly triangulated sense of what currently exists in our programs, but we may be well served by having more discussions about programmatic planning.

This research could be expanded by asking students what they want and need. Some studies suggest misalignment in what is offered and students' expectations and needs (Blackmon, 2024), a related parallel to demonstrate misalignments between the work faculty value and what is valued by tenure committees (Fritzsche, Hart-Davidson & Long, 2022). Happily, this research has already begun. At the time we were gathering our data, Julia Romberger reached out to us about a similar project, approached from the opposite direction: She had been surveying students about many of the same questions we were interested in.

Romberger also pointed us toward Barbara Lovitt's *Leaving the Ivory Tower* (2001), which investigates why students leave PhD programs. This text, though dated, points to some patterns that almost certainly remain true over decades. Importantly, academic and social integration are the largest factors in student success and retention. Lovitt argues: "Departments are not just social structural units in which graduate education takes place; they are cultures that are independent of the parent discipline and that shape the structures, process, and interactions that take place within them" (p. 260). While we would argue that local units are not wholly independent of parent disciplines—see Chris M. Golde's (2005) work for more on the complicated interplay between departments and disciplines—we agree with Lovitt's assessment that social integration is an important factor in doctoral student success. Higher education in rhetoric, composition, and technical communication is necessarily a dialogic enterprise; some level of social labor is required for success in our fields. Thus, successful programs will sponsor a variety of opportunities for students of varying backgrounds and levels to make strong connections with one another and with faculty.

Relatedly, Lovitt shows that "fit" is vital, and that it is not always something that students are well prepared to evaluate. "More students used the university's general reputation than information about the department or program" (p. 51). In Lovitt's survey, of the criteria students reported using in making their selections about PhD programs, the only criterion with a greater than 10% difference between "completers" and "non-completers" was "visited graduate schools." Students who were able to visit prospective schools and speak with program faculty fared 14% better in terms of ultimate completion. Thus, successful programs should create opportunities for admitted students to visit with their faculty before making decisions about matriculation. This does not necessarily mean funding a "campus visit" but could be accomplished through virtual means.

This research also supports the notion that our field might pursue additional inquiry into contra-professionalization. Research on TPC programs (Pennell, Frost, & Ghetto, 2018), like some mentoring research (Carliner, 2012), has previously found that creating infrastructure and formalized processes can at times hinder the development of successful professionalization. Rather, creating a culture that can create space for more organic connections seems to better serve students in the long term. As mentioned above, social integration is key, and students will require different elements to make social connections based on local contexts. Thus, programs should consider offering a variety of opportunities. Carter's (2013) showcase of Texas Tech's program offers a number of fantastic ideas that are workable for both online and face-to-face programs, to make connections *with the explicit understanding* that students also are responsible for the development and maintenance of healthy socio-academic relationships, that this is an important and basic responsibility for members of our disciplines. Part of the job of faculty is to teach students to engage in the discipline on their own; they cannot practice that if we're always in the room. Scaffolded professional development opportunities that include pathways into less structured interactions, like peer mentoring groups as one example, can lead students to becoming leaders themselves.

In sum, we offer the following recommendations for programs in rhetoric, composition, and technical communication fields:

For programs:

- Actively recruit in a variety of ways to reach a lot of different kinds of students
- Be responsive to prospective students and answer their questions honestly.
- Reflexively investigate and address misalignments in student expectations and program offerings; Michigan State's recent admissions pause offers a responsible example of this (Michigan State University, 2024)
- Reflect on what language is jargon and always explain. Better to explain when it's not needed than vice versa. For example, some incoming students do not know what assistantship funding means or what an assistantship is.
- Create mentoring networks and ensure that multiple people are checking in regularly with all students; sustain conversations among faculty (especially newer faculty) and students about the different ways academic mentoring can look (Goings, 2024).
- Foster both academic and social integration with a variety of entry points.
- Focus on fit in recruitment contexts. (This especially includes redirecting students who might be focused on prestige.)
- Enable and create space for contra-professionalization practices.
- Hold synchronous events that include many faculty, not just the program director, to help students get a sense of the program.
- Be aware of the job market and be able/willing to talk to students about their prospects after graduation.

- After acceptance, assign faculty to help onboard accepted students to avoid communication drop-off after admittance. This practice also widens student perspectives of the program and helps faculty understand incoming cohorts. And, it can lead to fruitful mentor/advisor assignments.

As a community of scholars and program directors in rhetoric, composition, and technical communication, we might consider building on our existing cross-institutional coalitions to share resources, strategies, and data pertaining to program support and fit. For example, creating a shared repository of admissions materials, assistantship details, mentoring models, and alumni career paths could help us better communicate our value to prospective students and set realistic expectations. Such bodies of work can also provide a corpus from which to generate peer-reviewed research. While much of the existing work on choosing and understanding doctoral programs in rhetoric, composition, and technical communication is available on an ad hoc basis rather than in peer-reviewed scholarship (for example, in our most recent admitted cohorts, most students applied because a professor recommended the program), it is still valuable and would benefit from added apparency and support. National organizations like CPTSC or the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) might facilitate working groups to track trends and use this data to encourage coordinated advocacy for funding and structural reform. Just as we call on students to collaborate and network, we hope administrators and faculty can draw on these findings to iteratively work to model a more connected, transparent, and mutually supportive field-wide approach to graduate education.

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Appendix A

Full Survey Text

Understanding Student Support Needed and Provided by PhD Programs in Rhet, Comp, and TPC

Start of Block: Block 1

Q0.1
We invite you to participate in our research study on PhD programs in Rhetoric, Composition, and Technical Communication. Completing this survey should take you between 5 and 15 minutes (depending on how many open-ended questions you skip/answer). By participating in the survey, you can reflect on your program's strengths, unique features, and supportive environments. You also contribute to knowledge that will help attract students to our field and ensure prospective students find supportive programs that are a good fit. By taking part in this survey, you will:
1. Shape the Future: Your insights will contribute to shaping the future of PhD programs, helping improve existing structures and attract prospective students.
2. Inform Best Practices: Your experiences will inform best practices in program coordination, mentorship, and support for PhD students.
3. Enhance Community: Participation fosters a sense of community among program coordinators, connecting you with peers who share similar responsibilities.
4. Stay Informed: Access the latest research findings and contribute to a growing body of knowledge in our field.
5. Support Prospective Students: Your input will assist prospective students in finding programs that align with their goals and values.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to the principal investigator, Erin Clark, Associate Professor & PhD Program Coordinator, Department of English, East Carolina University at froste@ecu.edu or 252-328-5561 or to the East Carolina or to the East Carolina University Institutional Review Board Office at 252-744-2914. . This study is certified exempt by the ECU IRB (UMCIRB 24-000221). Continuing with the survey indicates your informed consent as a participant. Thank you for being a part of this important study!

End of Block: Block 1

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q0 What is the name of your college/university (that is, the college/university whose PhD program you will be responding about)?

____

Q1: Which statement best describes your role?

- o I am currently coordinating/directing a PhD program (1)
- o I have previously coordinated/directed a PhD program (2)
- o I am a faculty member in a PhD program (3)
- o Other: (4) ____

Q2: With which fields is your program significantly aligned? (Choose all that apply)

- ▢ Rhetoric (1)
- ▢ Composition/Writing Studies (2)
- ▢ Technical Communication (3)
- ▢ Other: (4) ____

Q3: Approximately how many students are enrolled in your program at any given time?

- o Fewer than 8 (1)
- o 8-20 (2)
- o 20-30 (3)
- o 30+ (4)

Q4: Which activities does your program sponsor, in any format (online or face-to-face):

- ▢ Orientation (1)
- ▢ Meet and greets for prospective students (2)
- ▢ Teacher training (3)
- ▢ Regular, required professional development (4)
- ▢ Optional professional development (5)
- ▢ A jobs group (6)
- ▢ Book/article reading group (16)
- ▢ Writing groups (7)
- ▢ Formal mentorship pairings/groups (8)
- ▢ Centralized advising (9)
- ▢ De-centralized advising (all faculty serve as advisors) (10)

- ☐ Peer-to-peer mentoring (11)
- ☐ Conference preparation support (12)
- ☐ Financial support for conference travel (13)
- ☐ Financial support for visits for prospective students (14)
- ☐ Other: (15) ____

Q5: How does your program facilitate and support research opportunities for PhD students?

- o Extensive research funding and resources (1)
- o Moderate support for research initiatives (2)
- o Limited opportunities for research (3)
- o Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q6: Please provide additional details or examples regarding research opportunities:

____

Q7: What kind of mentorship and advisory support do PhD students receive in your program?

- o Robust mentorship and advisory system (1)
- o Adequate support with room for improvement (2)
- o Limited mentorship and advisory structure (3)
- o Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q8: Please elaborate on your program's mentorship structure:

____

Q9: What funding opportunities, scholarships, or grants are available to support PhD students in your program?

- o Diverse funding options and competitive scholarships (1)
- o Some funding opportunities and scholarships (2)
- o Limited financial support (3)
- o Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q10: If applicable, please describe available funding sources:

____

Q11: To what extent does your program encourage interdisciplinary collaboration for PhD students?

- o Strong emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration (1)
- o Moderate support for interdisciplinary projects (2)
- o Limited opportunities for interdisciplinary work (3)
- o Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q12: Share any examples or initiatives supporting interdisciplinary collaboration:

____

Q13: What professional development programs or workshops are offered to PhD students to enhance their skills?

- o Comprehensive professional development programs (1)
- o Some professional development opportunities (2)
- o Limited professional development support (3)
- o Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q14: Provide details on specific professional development offerings:

____

Q15: How would you describe the sense of community among PhD students within your program?

- o Strong and supportive community (1)
- o Moderate sense of community (2)
- o Limited community engagement (3)
- o Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q16: Share any events or initiatives for fostering a sense of community:

____

Q17: Which of the following best describes the alumni of your PhD program?

- o High success in securing academic positions or industry roles (1)
- o Moderate success in post-PhD placements (2)
- o Limited success in securing relevant positions (3)
- o Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q18: If applicable, please share additional placement information and/or examples of successful outcomes:

____

Q19: How flexible is the program in accommodating the diverse research interests of PhD students?

- o Highly flexible, with tailored options for individual research goals (1)
- o Moderately flexible, with some options for customization (2)
- o Limited flexibility in accommodating diverse research interests (3)
- o Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q20: Please offer any specific examples of program flexibility for individual research interests:

____

Q21: For programs offering fully funded positions, how would you rate the alignment of the provided stipend with the living expenses in the region?

- o Stipend is more than sufficient to cover living expenses (1)
- o Stipend covers basic living expenses with some room for improvement (2)
- o Stipend may not adequately cover essential living expenses (3)
- o Not applicable / I don't know (4)

Q22: If you have any additional comments or insights regarding stipends, please provide them here:

____

Q23: In what ways does your program actively pursue diversity and equity?

- ▢ Faculty research foci include DEI issues (1)
- ▢ Our program has a public DEI statement (2)
- ▢ Our valuing of diversity by department/unit/faculty/students is stated openly and visibly (7)
- ▢ We provide specific support for international and/or underrepresented students (3)
- ▢ We have a faculty that is diverse across multiple identity types (4)
- ▢ We have a student body that is diverse across multiple identity types (5)
- ▢ Other: (6)

____

Q24: In what ways is your program actively discussing/changing how you are approaching equity and inclusion issues? To what level is your program engaging your larger university/college, DEI offices, university lawyers, outside organizations, etc. in these endeavors?

____

Q25: What other information should we be thinking about as we consider the ways to make our PhD programs successful and supportive? You also may use this field to enter your name and email if you're willing to let us follow up with you.

____

End of Block: Default Question Block

Appendix B

Suggested questions to ask faculty when considering programs

- What kind of research support does your program offer? What are some specific research opportunities I should be aware of?
- What is the mentorship and advisory structure like in your program?
- What funding opportunities, scholarships, or grants are available? If I will be on an assistantship,[2] what does that look like?
- How does student governance work? Do faculty/department committees have student representation?
- Does the program sponsor professional development opportunities? How so? What kind of travel funding is provided for conference attendance?
- What is the community like here?
- Where can I find information about job placement rates for this program? What do graduates tend to go on to do?

Ask about your specific interests: “What sort of interdisciplinary possibilities are available in your program?”

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[2] An assistantship is a job assigned by the program. Typically an assistantship offers tuition remission as well as a modest stipend.

From Policy to Practice: Trauma-Informed Approaches to Student Attendance

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Abstract This article contributes to inclusive TPC pedagogical scholarship by using trauma-informed pedagogical (TIP) principles to study an under researched area: classroom attendance policies. Specifically, we treat instructors as technical communicators in the classroom and focus on how they design, implement, and enforce their attendance policies. Guided by Miriam Williams' (2020) conceptual framework for policy analysis, we conducted interviews with instructors at a local institution to identify that a variety of factors impact their decisions regarding attendance policy, from their teaching philosophy and course type to institutional contexts. The challenge of developing inclusive attendance policies coalesced to two themes across a spectrum: flexibility and accountability. We offer TIP principles to address these challenges and provide specific suggestions for how technical communicators can make change both in the classroom as teachers and in institutional policy development to create more inclusive attendance policies.

Keywords attendance policy, inclusive TPC pedagogy, policy development, trauma-informed pedagogy

A Student Story

A student both authors know has faced a recurring challenge throughout their academic journey: knowing how much to disclose to access support from their teachers. As an undergraduate, when their great-grandmother who had raised them after foster care passed away, they reached out for help managing coursework. One professor responded with a single sentence: *You should just drop the class.* The response did not even acknowledge the student's loss, making them

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feel like an unimportant burden rather than a person worth supporting. This dismissal made future disclosures even harder.

In graduate school, the student struggled with self-harm but, fearing stigma, chose not to disclose this in an email informing their professor their first absence. The response was curt: they needed to *prioritize class* and that the absence would *affect their recommendation letter.* Once again, they felt that their well-being was secondary to academic expectations. Later, in another course, they informed a professor that their disability was preventing them from contributing to the week's online discussion board—the first assignment they had missed. The professor reprimanded them, insisting that their position as a disabled person made their *expertise on disability studies* that week *even more imperative.*

These experiences highlight a troubling reality. While many educators have flexibility in attendance policies, access to compassion often depends on disclosure. Yet disclosure itself is fraught. Teachers may say, *If I had known you were traumatized, I would have helped.* But students who have faced dismissal, judgment, or punishment for past disclosures are often retraumatized by the very act of asking for support. The expectation that students must expose their most personal struggles to receive basic grace reinforces the very trauma that hinders their ability to succeed.

Introduction

How can educators communicate attendance expectations without retraumatizing students? Attendance policies profoundly shape students' educational experiences, their sense of belonging, academic performance, and well-being. Yet rigid policies often punish those navigating trauma, reinforcing stress and disengagement.

Trauma-informed pedagogy (TIP) recognizes trauma's prevalence and seeks to support students rather than exacerbate harm. Research links Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) to long-term health and behavioral impacts, including academic struggles (Felitti & Anda, 1998). More recent work (Venet, 2021) advocates for structural changes that support *all* students, not just those who disclose trauma. Attendance policies, then, are a critical site for trauma-informed reform: rather than enforcing rigid compliance, they should balance flexibility with accountability to foster learning without penalizing students for circumstances beyond their control.

For technical and professional communication (TPC) educators, attendance policies are also a site of research and intervention. As technical communicators both designing policies in their classrooms and shaping institutional guidelines, TPC scholars can advocate for trauma-informed approaches that foster inclusivity.

To explore these issues, we conducted a qualitative study with instructors in the English department at a research-intensive public university in the Mountain West region. Our study examines:

- How do instructors design attendance policies and why?
- How are attendance policies communicated and implemented with students?
- What challenges and tensions arise in designing and enforcing attendance policies?
- How aware are instructors of trauma's impact on student attendance and learning?

Our findings reveal that instructors struggle to codify flexibility while maintaining accountability. Using a trauma-informed lens, we argue that TIP provides a valuable framework for navigating these tensions. Attendance policies acknowledge trauma and prioritize learning over punishment foster more equitable, supportive classrooms. We conclude with recommendations for educators and institutions on crafting policies that balance care and accountability, ensuring all students have the opportunity to succeed.

Literature Review

Trauma and Technical Communication Pedagogies

Trauma disproportionately affects marginalized populations, making it essential to consider within inclusive and social justice-oriented pedagogies in technical and professional communication (TPC). Scholars have challenged the notion of TPC as objective and value-neutral by incorporating accessibility, cultural rhetorics, and social justice principles (Colton & Walton, 2015; Edwards, 2018, "Race and the workplace"; Frost, 2014; Haas, 2012; Melonçon, 2016; Palmeri, 2006; Scott, Longo, & Wills, 2006). Efforts to create inclusive classrooms have addressed accessibility through universal design (Hitt, 2018; Walters, 2010) and racial equity (Edwards, 2018, "Inclusive practices"; Shelton, 2020), emphasizing the embodied experiences of students and instructors. However, less attention has been given to how trauma impacts student learning in TPC classrooms.

TIP offers a crucial framework for bridging this gap. Scholars in rhetoric and writing studies have explored how writing classrooms can foster healing (Day, 2019; Tayles, 2021; Valentino, 2021), but TPC has yet to fully integrate trauma-aware approaches. Imad (2022) defined trauma as experiences that challenge one's sense of safety, support, and belonging, including systemic and generational trauma. TIP extends beyond recognizing individual traumatic events to addressing the structural conditions like systemic trauma from racism, childhood adversity, and poverty that impact students' ability to learn.

Trauma Informed Principles

To guide our analysis, we applied trauma-informed care principles from SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) and scholarly reinterpretations (see Table 1). By incorporating TIP into TPC, we aim to foster more equitable, supportive learning environments. The following sections synthesize scholarly definitions of each principle, while a more detailed discussion on how we applied some of these principles in our deductive coding round is provided in the Methods section.

Table 1. Connections aong different definitions of trauma-informed pedagogy

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">Trauma Informed Principles</th></tr>
<tr><td>SAMHSA (CDC, 2022)</td><td>Imad (2022)</td><td>Venet (2022)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Safety</td><td rowspan="2">Safety (emphasizing transparency and trustworthiness)</td><td rowspan="2">Predictability</td></tr>
<tr><td>Trustworthiness</td></tr>
<tr><td>Peer support</td><td rowspan="2">Community (highlighting peer supporting and collaboration)</td><td rowspan="2">Connection</td></tr>
<tr><td>Collaboration and mutuality</td></tr>
<tr><td>Empowerment, voice, and choice</td><td>Empowerment (focusing on providing choice and encouraging self-advocacy)</td><td>Empowerment</td></tr>
<tr><td>Cultural historical and gender issues</td><td>Cultural sensitivity at the center of each principle</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>Meaning (centering on identification of goals and purpose)</td><td>Flexibility</td></tr>
</table>

Safety and Trustworthiness

Trauma-informed classrooms establish predictability and transparency to foster trust (Imad, 2022; Venet, 2022). Trauma often results from unpredictability, making inconsistent policies—such as unclear attendance rules—particularly harmful. However, calls for “safety” must be nuanced, as Davidson (2021) warns that prioritizing comfort over critical engagement can reinforce inequities. Instead, trauma-informed educators cultivate structured, secure environments where students can take intellectual risks without retraumatization.

Peer Support, Collaboration, and Mutuality

Social connection reduces the isolating effects of trauma (Friedman et al., 2022). Rather than treating peer support and collaboration as separate, Imad (2022) and Venet (2022) emphasize that building meaningful relationships through group work, shared experiences, and representation in course materials help students feel valued. Joy and playfulness also contribute to classroom bonds, reinforcing engagement and trust (Venet, 2022).

Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

Trauma can create a sense of powerlessness, making student agency and choice essential (Venet, 2022). While SAMHSA defines empowerment as fostering self-advocacy, systemic barriers often undermine this ideal. Disability accommodation processes, for instance, require repeated disclosure and navigation of bureaucratic hurdles (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2022; Dolmage, 2017). Trauma-informed approaches must go beyond encouraging advocacy by structurally supporting student agency and incorporating flexible policies without demanding disclosures and formal procedures.

Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

Cultural, historical, and gender issues permeate all aspects of trauma-informed pedagogy (Imad, 2022). Trauma is not experienced in isolation—it is shaped by systemic inequities related to race, gender, disability, and class, (Thompson & Marsh, 2022), but also by personal histories that do not fit easily into dominant frameworks of marginalization. Socially just approaches to TPC pedagogy must resist oversimplifying whose trauma is "legitimate" or most in need of redress**.** While it is crucial to acknowledge structural oppression, a trauma-informed approach does not assume that only visibly marginalized students experience harm. Trauma cuts across identities, affecting students in ways that may be systemic, personal, or both.

Thus, trauma-informed education aligns with social justice pedagogy not by prioritizing specific narratives but by critically examining how positionality and privilege is relational and contextual (Walton et al., 2018). This requires moving beyond checklist-style inclusivity efforts to create learning environments where all students feel supported, regardless of whether their struggles are readily recognized as marginalization based on racial, gender, and cultural identities.

Meaning and Flexibility

Beyond SAMHSA's framework, meaning and flexibility play critical roles in trauma-informed learning. Imad (2022) argues that students engage more deeply when coursework connects to personal, professional, or social goals. Venet (2022) warns that rigid structures can alienate trauma-affected students, making flexibility—within a predictable framework—key to fostering resilience.

Attendance Policies as Technical Communication

Researching pedagogical policies can also extend policy research in the field of TPC. In this body of scholarship, researchers have focused on not only the language of policies (Edenfield, 2018; Harlow, 2015; Jones et al., 2012; Lawrence et al., 2019; Petersen & Moeller, 2016; Stevens, 2022) but also the processes of developing and implementing policies (Card, 2020; Griggs, 2007; Thatcher, 2000; Williams, 2009; Williams & James, 2008; Workman et al., 2021). Aligning with these scholars, we see policies as rhetorical whose design, implementation, and evaluations require negotiations among multiple stakeholders in complex situations. As Williams (2022) pointed out, policy development should be treated as a technological process wherein technical communicators can identify sites of inquiry and intervention to design more inclusive policies and communicate and implement them in ways that are more equitable and accountably to the communities the policies serve.

In this article, we see educators and instructors as technical communicators in that they must communicate complex and specialized information to audiences who are not familiar with such content. If we understand technical communicators as "symbolic analysts" (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2013), then we can treat instructors as technical communicators when they engage in activities such as syllabi design, course policy development, etc. Doing so, we join the scholarly conversations that treat academic practices as user experience design practices (Crane & Cargile Cook, 2022; Jones, 2018; Thominet, 2024). In these studies, researchers have treated students as end-users of course documents such as syllabi and grading systems where they have valuable expert knowledge to share. In arguing for user-centered design approaches to teaching, they effectively treat instructors as technical communicators.

Others have treated course documents as critical tools for “decenter[ing] privileged identities and disrupt[ing] existing oppressive systems as a pedagogical practice” (Hatcher & Gabriel, 2024, p. 327). Specifically in this research, Gabriel has shared the example of their Accountability Policy, designed "to interrogate and subvert socially constructed notions perpetuated by white supremacy" (p. 333) by modeling their own professional ethos as a form of relational accountability and by inviting students to consider how they held themselves accountable to the class community as a form of professionalism. We resonate with Gabriel that course policies should not be used to mold students into a certain exclusionary type of body, but rather that they reflect values of the instructor and can set tones for the class that may reinforce or challenge oppressive systems.

Our study extends this body of scholarship by examining how teachers design and implement course policies, specifically attendance policies. While the teachers who participated in our study were not all teachers of technical and professional communication, we argue that this study has implications for course policy development for all instructors including technical communication course and curriculum designers. It also illustrates how technical communication theories and frameworks such as Miriam Williams' conceptual framework for policy research, can contribute to pedagogical practices and institutional policy development. Using public policy issues related to racial injustice and gun control, Williams (2022) developed a "PRS conceptual framework" for technical and professional communication researchers that "requires an understanding of the **policy** development process in practice, the **role** of technical communicators as advocate for stakeholders in public policy writing, and the traditional and emerging **sites** for conducting our studies" (p. 34-35). To operationalize this framework, Williams explained that researchers should first identify which stage of development of the policy the research takes place, from identifying problems to evaluating policy implementation. Then, researchers should identify the role of TPC in the policy issue including how technical communicators can "contribute to different stages of the public policy development process;" and how they can collect and analyze data in order to make suggestions for "improvement to documents, design, and processes" (p. 35). Researchers should also identify the stakeholders we want to advocate for as well as "ethical and social justice frameworks we work within" (p. 35). Finally, the researchers can identify the sites of inquiry where we can find answers to these questions. While Williams' framework was developed for working with public policy issues, we find it helpful in analyzing policy issues in other contexts.

Research on attendance policy from other fields tend to focus on investigating the correlations between attendance policies and students' academic achievements (as measured/reflected by grades) in the class, motivated by the debate on the importance of attendance policy (Credé et al., 2010) and students' perceptions of attendance policies (Chenneville & Jordan, 2008; Friedman et al., 2001; Persky et al., 2014; Welsen, 2022). What's missing in these often quantitative and review studies is more qualitative examinations of how instructors develop and implement their attendance policies. Treating instructors as technical communicators who need to consider multiple factors to design and implement a policy can reveal more in-depth insights on ways attendance policy can impact student learning. Using Williams' framework, we treat instructors playing multiple roles related to attendance policies, from designing it, to communicating about it, and to implementing it. Throughout the process, they have to consider various stakeholders across the sites of their classrooms and their institutions. This framework provides a methodological guidance to our specific data collection methods. In the next section, we detail our research design.

Methods

Data Collection

This exploratory qualitative study (IRB #13663) involved interviews to identify patterns in faculty attendance policy design and implementation (Hayhoe & Brewer, 2020). Using a stratified sampling technique (Geisler & Swarts, 2019), we recruited ten English department instructors at a research-intensive public university in the Mountain West, ensuring variation in teaching experience and rank. Participants—lecturers, assistant professors, and full professors—had a minimum of five years of teaching experience and taught courses ranging from introductory composition to upper-division literature and technical communication. Adjuncts and graduate instructors were excluded to focus on those with sustained teaching experience. All names in this study are pseudonyms.

Faculty were recruited via departmental listservs and direct emails. Each participated in a 30- to 90-minute Zoom interview conducted by Author 1. Before the interview, the participants provided past and current attendance policies. Semi-structured interviews incorporated these documents, with questions exploring policy rationale, implementation, enforcement, and external influences (see Appendix 1 for the list of interview questions).

Guided by Williams' (2022) framework for policy research and our research questions, our interview questions focused on:

- Identifying policy problems and stakeholders
- Collecting historical and current policy information
- Understanding policy implementation, enforcement, and compliance
- Evaluating policies and their effectiveness

Unlike Williams' (2022) original framework, which examines policies as external structures, our study considered instructors as both policy designers and communicators. While we did not explicitly ask about trauma-informed pedagogy, our analysis identified whether and how these principles were present in their policies.

Data Analysis

We applied a thematic coding approach (Saldaña, 2009), moving iteratively from transcripts to categorized themes and refining them for consistency. The first and second rounds of coding were inductive, answering the first three research questions. In the third round of coding, we took a deductive approach by applying pre-established trauma-informed pedagogical principles to our data to identify whether and how participants adopted these principles in their attendance policies. For member checking, participants were invited to review the completed research article before formal peer review to ensure accurate representation of their perspectives.

First-Round Coding

Author 1 initially coded transcripts and policies using Hayhoe & Brewer’s (2020) definition of coding by simultaneously segmenting and organizing the data in the smallest chunks. Author 1 identified verbs that signified actions or decisions in attendance policy design and segmented the data according to the topical chain associated with the verb (Geisler & Swarts, 2019). These were categorized according to Williams’ (2022) framework, linking each design rationale decision to external factors, stakeholders, and policy language. Author 2 then reviewed and validated categorizations, adjusting as needed.

Table 2. Data organization

William’s (2022) Stages of Policy Development	Our Coding Category	Reasoning
Problem	Design/Developmental Rationale	Each design decision was analyzed through a single, core design rationale, which was then connected to all relevant external factors, challenges, and policy language. This allowed us to capture the full context and rationale of the design decision.
Stakeholders	Stakeholders Considered	For each design decision, we identified all relevant stakeholders the teachers named as influencing or being considered in the design process.
Proposed policies History Current policy	Proposed future improvements External factors impacting policy design Policy language reflecting these elements	Here we captured the stages of policy design by recording the historical context, current policy language, and any proposed future changes associated with the rationale behind each decision.
Implementation and regulation	How the attendance policy was implemented and enforced	Implementation was treated as a separate dimension in a second excel sheet. We linked each attendance

	Rationale for specific implementation External factors impacting implementation Challenges in implementation Proposed future improvements to implementation Policy language reflecting these elements	policy implementation action and linked it to its associated rationale for those choices, external factors influencing implementation, and any challenges faced. Coding policy language and implementation separately helped us identify discrepancies between how policies were written and how they were enacted, revealing the hidden knowledge students need to navigate attendance policies.

To refine our categories, we transitioned from spreadsheet analysis to sticky-note coding, where both researchers iteratively coded, adjusting codes and categories based on emerging patterns (see Table 3). By the end of the first round, our coding structure included:

Table 3. First-round coded categories

Refined Category	Description
Policy Language & Design	How attendance was defined and evaluated, whether it was graded or ungraded, penalty- vs. reward-based approaches, and enforcement methods.
Implementation & Student Interactions	How instructors introduced attendance policies, engaged in conversations about attendance, and assessed student participation through proof of learning or feedback.
Rationale	Teaching philosophies, course objectives, expectations of rigor, workforce preparation, and beliefs about why students miss class.

Impacting factors	Institutional policies, class type, instructor background, student behaviors, and external influences such as COVID-19 and technology.

Second-Round of Coding: Identifying Themes

In this stage, we examined the challenges instructors faced in designing and implementing attendance policies and identified the themes of flexibility and accountability. While many participants shared ways they incorporated flexibility into their attendance policy, whether in policy language or in implementation, they also noted accountability as an important rationale for attendance because of the expectations placed on students and instructors from institutions and their own teaching philosophies. Challenges thus arose as instructors had to balance expectations on academic rigor as linked to attendance and students' own lived realities, which often involved navigating issues of trust, mental health, trauma, etc. Instructors also had to navigate their own lived experiences, teaching philosophies and institutional policies to balance their flexibility on attendance policies.

Third-Round Coding: Applying the Trauma-Informed Pedagogy (TIP) Framework

Using common TIP principles—safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment—we analyzed how instructors enacted trauma-informed practices, addressing our last research question. Unlike mutually exclusive coding (Geisler & Swarts, 2019), we allowed actions to be categorized under multiple TIP principles when appropriate. To maintain focus on implementation rather than intention, we coded only concrete policy actions, not instructors' stated rationales. For instance, if a policy allowed students to miss class for illness, we coded it under safety, as it contributed to classroom well-being. This approach aligns with trauma-informed care, which prioritizes enacted practices over abstract beliefs.

A limitation of our research study is that we did not collect student participants to verify how the attendance policy implementations were received. Therefore, some of the TIP categories, like mutuality (CDC, 2022) or meaning (Imad, 2022) were not coded for because we were unable to identify how students responded to these policies. We also didn't code for flexibility (Venet, 2022) as it already emerged as a theme in our second round of coding. Since cultural, historical, and gender factors are woven into every TIP principle (Imad, 2022; Thompson & Marsh, 2022), we categorized instances of teachers acknowledging these factors' impact on attendance under relevant TIP categories such as safety or trust.

Therefore, the following coding categories were used deductively by both researchers who coded the segmented data together:

Table 4. TIP coding categories.

TIP Coding Category	Definition
Safety	Encompassing both physical, emotional, and social dimensions of safety
Trust	Focusing on transparency in policy implementation and trust-building actions like how a teacher informed their students of the attendance policy
Choice	Offering students choice in how attendance policies are implemented like alternative assignments for class participation
Collaboration	Fostering a classroom community or collaboration between teachers and students.
Empowerment	Promoting self-advocacy

By triangulating TIP categories with our second-round themes, we observed how, in navigating flexibility and accountability in their attendance policies, participants intentionally or unintentionally applied trauma-informed principles or not.

Results

In this section, we start by illustrating how participants balanced flexibility and accountability in their attendance policy design and implementation. While we discuss these two themes separately, they are closely intertwined, as accountability can be seen as a mechanism to set boundaries for flexibility. Finally, we discuss whether and how our participants' approaches to policy implementation reflected trauma-informed pedagogical principles, the results of our third round of coding.

Flexibility in the Classroom

Our participants all had some form of student-centered teaching philosophy that required them to recognize a rigid policy would not best serve students. Further, external factors like class type offered different affordances and constraints on how flexible a teacher could be with attendance. The strategies they employed for enacting flexibility include:

- Allowing a set number of absences without penalty
- Accepting alternate assignments for missed classes
- Providing options for remote attendance when possible
- Clearly communicating policies and limits around flexibility

Participants often used policy to initiate a conversation with students and generally offered some degree of flexibility due to good will toward the students. Marianne said they reiterated the flexibility in their policy when they had a tough time in their life to remind students to take mental or physical health days for themselves. Others use the maximum number of "free" absences to trigger a larger conversation about participation and learning objectives, reminding the students most affected by the policy of the parameters surrounding absences. Some teachers explained in their policy what they wanted to see in emails requesting absences. One teacher, Blake, set the boundary that they would not go over class material over email but would during office hours.

During COVID-19, teachers had to invent alternative ways students could learn other than synchronous classes. Even after the return to in-person classes, this led to some teachers implementing certain activities students could do to "make up" an absence. Even then, there were usually special cases that required a teacher to either fail a student or grant them additional flexibility by offering make-up assignments not outlined in the policy. Many teachers said they were more willing to offer flexibility if a student was engaged and willing to show they had completed the learning objectives.

Nevertheless, some participants harbored skepticism, viewing student absences through a lens of poor judgment or entitlement. For instance, one instructor might readily accept a student's reason for missing class, acknowledging the importance of personal well-being, while another might challenge the validity of the excuse, suspect dishonesty and require proof. One participant, Sarah, expressed that students often lied to them about why they missed class and she had to "call them on their lies."

However, some of our participants recognized that monitoring and scrutinizing students' absences infringes upon their autonomy. They argued demanding proof or challenging students' sincerity erodes the trust essential for fostering a supportive learning environment. However, acknowledging that some students do lie about their absences adds complexity to this discussion. Instructors often need to help students develop better judgment about when missing class is appropriate. However, how this guidance is delivered matters. Striking a balance between holding students accountable and treating them with empathy is crucial in maintaining both student integrity and a supportive classroom environment with a foundation of trust between teacher and student, especially if we consider how certain approaches to flexibility can marginalize students, such as those with mental health challenges.

Finally, an important justification for limited flexibility in our data is that participants wanted to better prepare students for the workplace. Sage described a tricky situation where one student would consistently need flexibility with attendance from semester to semester, and if the student did extra work, they were willing to give it. However, when the student attempted to complete their student-internship, the job could not offer that flexibility, and therefore the student did not receive a recommendation from their employer. The instructor in this situation wanted to offer flexibility where they could but wondered if they were doing their students a disservice by not being transparent about the workforce's limitations on attendance accommodations. This challenge illustrates how accountability serves as a constraint on flexibility.

Accountability in the Classroom

Instructors who offer flexibility in their attendance policy often use accountability as a justification in that they want students to take responsibility for their learning. Our data revealed that accountability can refer to a variety of things: the instructor being accountable to the students; the instructor being accountable to the institution; students being accountable to themselves and their own learning; and students being accountable to the class community, including the following strategies:

- Communicating with students about any barriers or challenges they may be facing that could impact their attendance or participation.
- Designing classroom activities that emphasize community-engaged learning
- Offering multiple modes of engagement in the class, including group discussion, text-chat features, or asynchronous class involvement
- Asking students to reflect on their own engagement
- Checking in mid-semester

A teacher's responsibility to the students can include creating a safe and welcoming environment in the classroom. For example, Bailey explained to the students that because the teacher is accountable to the students to be there and prepared, the students are also accountable to be there and prepared. However, it's imperative to critically examine this notion of accountability. Teachers are remunerated by the institution to fulfill their teaching duties, which inherently places them in a position of responsibility towards their students. In contrast, students who are paying for their education are not subject to the same structural accountability.

Some framed student accountabilities in terms of being accountable to themselves and to each other in the learning community, including the teacher and other students, reflecting a socio-cultural view of learning. For example, Sarah had students complete an activity at the beginning of the semester in class where students must work together to put together a puzzle, emphasizing the importance of community in the classroom. English and writing courses are often discussion-based and many of our participants emphasized that if students are not engaging, then learning cannot happen in the classroom. While participants like Sage and

Sarah emphasized the importance of community in their classrooms by defining engagement as "participatory" and collaborative, they still didn’t offer clear evidence of this expectation within their attendance policies.

Most instructors agreed that the institutional attendance policy is the bottom line for accountability. Sarah even explained that they liked the institutional policy to be the "bad guy" rather than the teacher be the enforcer of attendance penalties. However, there can be inconsistencies with the institutional policy. Aiden explained that during the uncertainty of attendance policies in the midst of COVID, the Disability Resource Center told them that students should not miss more than 50% of the class, which was significantly different than the institutional policy that a student should not miss more than 20% of the class. Also, the institutional policy stated that both "excused" and "unexcused" absences should not exceed 20%. Most teachers explained they hated playing the "excused" absence game. Further, if both excused and unexcused absences count toward the 20% maximum, then the importance of the distinction is lost. Not only that, but author 1 had been asked by athletics coordinators to be flexible with the 20% maximum number of absences.

While offering alternative assignments can be a mechanism of flexibility for attendance, it can also be understood as a way to keep students accountable. But these sorts of alternative assignments often take a great deal of labor on the teacher's part. However, how can a student clearly communicate their engagement? Some students might think the email in their absence asking, "what did I miss?" shows their engagement, whereas many teachers would say it demonstrates the opposite. This sort of "proof of engagement" is imperative for policies that do not outline penalties.

Trauma Informed Pedagogy, Flexibility, and Accountability

Choice Constrained by Empowerment

Some teachers discussed flexibility in terms of deadlines and curriculum content, but their experiences revealed a tension between offering choice and fostering student empowerment.

For example, Aiden increased flexibility by allowing all deadlines—including attendance make-up work—to be due at the end of the semester. This was coded under the TIP principle of “Choice” because it maximized student autonomy over their coursework. However, Aiden questioned whether this approach was truly beneficial, as many students procrastinated and found themselves overwhelmed at the end of the term. This concern was coded under “Empowerment” because it highlighted a key issue: while flexibility grants students more control, it does not necessarily equip them with the skills to manage that control effectively.

Similarly, Dakota initially implemented a "choose your own adventure" teaching model, allowing students to decide which aspects of the curriculum they wanted to focus on. However, they eventually abandoned this approach, believing that as the instructor, they had a better understanding of the subject and the skills students needed to develop. Dakota framed this shift not as a limitation of choice, but as a way to empower students by guiding them toward informed decision-making.

These examples illustrate that while flexibility in choice can enhance student agency, it does not inherently lead to better learning outcomes. When coding these approaches under TIP principles, we argue that unrestricted choice can sometimes hinder empowerment rather than foster it. True empowerment requires direction and scaffolding, ensuring that flexibility is paired with the tools students need to make informed, effective choices. Additionally, when students reach their maximum number of absences, teachers like Blake use this moment as an opportunity for collaboration, inviting the student into a conversation about how to best support their continued participation. This reinforces the idea that flexibility is not just about providing options but also about ensuring that students feel empowered to use them. Like Hatcher & Gabriel (2024) argued, this strategy of empowerment could help students develop their own sense of professionalism and accountability to the class community, instead of perpetuating dominant ideas of learning that marginalize diverse bodily experiences.

Choice Constrained by Trust

One common method of increasing flexibility in attendance policies is offering a set number of "free" absences without penalty. Blake, for example, framed these as "sick" days, both mental and physical, which we coded under the TIP principle of "safety." This policy acknowledges that students should not be forced to choose between their health and their grades and contributes to a safer classroom environment, particularly for immuno-compromised students and students who have experienced trauma. Additionally, we coded this under "Choice" because the free absences model allows students to exercise choice in deciding when they need to step away from class.

However, flexibility alone does not eliminate the structural and emotional barriers students face when seeking accommodations. Many students hesitate to reach out when they surpass their allotted absences, fearing that their reasons will not be believed or considered legitimate. Many of our participants described the frequent distressing emails from students who disclosed deeply personal tragedies in excruciating detailthat some believed to be an overcompensation for their fear of being dismissed.

Blake addressed this issue by building trust early in the semester. On the first day, they required students to email an introduction, outlining their learning needs. We coded this under "trust" because it normalizes communication between students and their instructor before a crisis occurs. By responding to each email personally, Blake signaled to students that their concerns will be heard and respected, reducing the emotional burden of reaching out later in the semester.

This model highlights a crucial limitation of flexibility: without trust, students may not feel safe enough to use the options available to them. While free absences provide choice, they are most effective when paired with proactive trust-building strategies that help students feel comfortable advocating for their needs.

Hard Conversations and Accountability

As mentioned before, one of the challenges our participants faced is determining when and how to tell a student they have reached the limits of flexibility. Often, this comes down to accountability—helping students recognize when they may no longer be able to succeed in the course and guiding them toward the best course of action.

For some instructors, this meant having difficult conversations about whether a student should drop the class. Sage described the importance of framing such discussions with care and compassion. When advising a student to drop, they emphasize that it may simply not be the right time for the student to take the course, but that they could return when they are more prepared. This approach was also coded under "Choice" and "Empowerment" because it reinforces that students still had control over their educational journey and were not being shut out permanently. Unlike Sage's compassionate framing, the blunt one-sentence email received by the student in our opening narrative would not empower the student or help them understand their choices. By framing difficult conversations as acts of guidance rather than rejection, instructors can ensure that students feel supported—even when the outcome is dropping the course.

Hidden Mechanisms for Accountability and Flexibility

Offering flexibility without clearly codifying them can create both logistical and pedagogical challenges. The lack of transparency can diminish the benefits of flexibility.

One reason for this challenge is practicality. Attendance policies are designed for broad application, while extensive flexibility is typically reserved for exceptional circumstances. Codifying every possible accommodation could significantly increase an instructor's workload and limit their ability to make case-by-case decisions. As a result, many teachers preferred to exercise flexibility informally, adjusting policies based on individual student needs.

However, lack of codification can also create barriers for students. When students are unaware that flexibility exists or unclear about when it applies, they may struggle to advocate for themselves or feel uncertain about their options. For example, Morgan offered flexibility by withholding a codified number of "free" absences from students. Instead of stating a fixed limit in the syllabus, Morgan determined when a student had exceeded an acceptable number of absences and then informed them that they should drop the class. Students who are unaware of the limit may be surprised when they are suddenly told to withdraw, making the conversation more difficult. For this reason, we coded these actions as issues of trust and empowerment in addition to choice. A student who does not know that their instructor is willing to be flexible may assume that no flexibility is available, limiting their ability to take proactive action in managing their attendance.

Some instructors managed this challenge by signaling flexibility in their syllabi. For example, some included a statement encouraging students who were struggling with attendance to speak with them directly. Others explicitly listed acceptable reasons for absences, such as physical health issues and, less frequently, mental health concerns. By codifying some level of flexibility, instructors provided students with clearer expectations while maintaining room for case-by-case decisions.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that designing and implementing attendance policies require instructors to engage with the tensions between flexibility and accountability by considering the principles of trauma-informed pedagogy: safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. Instructors must reflect on their own teaching philosophies, particularly their relationships with students and the kind of learning environments they want to foster. While individual instructors play a key role in applying trauma-informed pedagogical (TIP) principles, systemic change at the institutional level is also necessary. Institutional policies should align with the values of social justice and cultural studies-oriented technical and professional communication (TPC) pedagogies, which emphasize the importance of lived experience. However, this alignment requires nuance—while valuing students' lived experiences is central to inclusive pedagogy, learning objectives must still be met.

Social justice pedagogies emphasize the need to respond to the needs of the structurally disadvantaged (Walton et al., 2018) while trauma-informed approaches extend this argument by arguing trauma is often a consequence of systemic cultural, historical, and gender issues (Thompson and Marsh, 2022). Applying TIP principles to attendance policies answers this call for inclusivity by acknowledging and redressing these barriers. For example, ensuring safety and fostering trust and collaboration between instructor and students can help students recognize their experiences are valued in the class. Through offering student choice and empowering them to advocate for themselves, instructors can also amplify their experiences, especially if they experience other forms of marginalization. However, individual instructors' practices can only go so far in navigating these challenges. Like other advocates for socially just pedagogies, we also argue for systemic changes that can further enhance policy transparency and challenge hegemonic ideas about students.

This section explores the implications of our study for instructors and institutional policymaking. At the instructor level, we discuss how concepts like the window of tolerance and unconditional positive regard can help mitigate the burden of students having to articulate trauma to access flexibility. At the institutional level, we argue for codifying mental health accommodations and developing support to help students transition into professional environments with varying flexibility policies. In particular, we highlight the role of technical writers in institutional policy development. Although instructors already function as technical writers—as seen in the varied attempts teachers made at defining "participation"—they can also incorporate usability testing into attendance policies—for instance, by actively seeking and incorporating student feedback. A significant portion of instructors' policy expertise remains unspoken and derives from accumulated teaching experience rather than structured, formal training. Technical communicators can make this work explicit by examining institutional policies through frameworks like Williams' (2010), identifying how flexibility and accountability are shaped by various factors and thus help institutions evaluate and improve upon their policies, including attendance policies and others.

Instructor Recommendations

A key principle of trauma-informed care is resisting re-traumatization by setting clear, realistic expectations while remaining flexible. Applying principles of safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment helps balance accountability with student well-being. Many of our participants were aware of cultural issues impacting attendance—disability, family obligations, financial constraints, and other systemic barriers—yet traditional attendance policies often fail to accommodate these challenges. By layering these principles with other socially just and cultural-studies oriented pedagogical practices, instructors can operationalize practices that truly empower traumatized students. In this section, we offer specific suggestions for how to operationalize this in the context of attendance policy design.

The Window of Tolerance

If we recognize that cultural and economic factors shape students' access to education, we must also acknowledge that trauma affects their ability to learn. The concept of the window of tolerance helps illustrate why attendance flexibility should not depend on students' ability to articulate their struggles. Developed by Dan Siegel, the window of tolerance describes an individual's optimal emotional state for learning (Hershler et al., 2021). However, trauma can narrow this window, making it easier for them to enter hyper-aroused (anxious, overwhelmed) or hypo-aroused (numb, disengaged) states (Hershler et al., 2021).

For example, if a student has recently lost a loved one, their window might be narrowed for months or years. A seemingly minor stressor—such as their sibling eating the last bagel—could push them into a dysregulated state. That student may not be able to articulate why they are struggling or to recognize that their reaction stems from trauma. Expecting students to justify their absences or emotional states places an unnecessary burden on them and can contribute to re-traumatization.

To make attendance policies more accessible and trauma-informed, instructors can:

- Educate students about the window of tolerance and provide a simple way for them to communicate distress without disclosing personal details. For example, Author 1 tells students they can simply say they are "out of their window of tolerance" if they need support.
- Codify mental health as a valid reason for absence in syllabi, reinforcing that emotional well-being is prioritized.
- Codify paths to flexibility like make-up assignments and alternative participation methods in policy so students know that flexibility is an option.
- Hold non-confrontational check-ins with students who frequently struggle, focusing on collaborative problem-solving.
- Avoid punitive attendance tracking that force students to relive trauma in order to receive accommodations.

Unconditional Positive Regard

Another method for creating accessible, transparent attendance policies is applying unconditional positive regard—a principle that values students' inherent worth regardless of their struggles. Trauma often creates a sense of unworthiness, leading individuals to believe they deserve negative consequences. According to Venet (2021), teachers frequently adopt a deficit mindset, seeing struggling students as lacking and positioning themselves as "saviors." This mindset often results in lowered expectations rather than genuine support. Instead, trauma-informed pedagogy emphasizes trust, empowerment, and collaborative learning.

To integrate unconditional positive regard into attendance policies, instructors can:

- Separate attendance from student worth by reinforcing that a student's value in the classroom is not dependent on perfect attendance.
- Offer alternative forms of engagement (e.g., discussion boards, reflective assignments) for students who cannot be physically present.
- Communicate expectations clearly and transparently so students understand their options without fear of punitive consequences.
- Create space for student autonomy by allowing flexibility while maintaining clear learning objectives.

By incorporating trauma-informed principles into attendance policies, instructors can foster a learning environment that prioritizes student well-being while upholding accountability. These adjustments extend social justice pedagogy beyond theoretical discussions, embedding equity into the structure of the classroom. In addition, instructors can implement usability testing methods to help develop their attendance policies, such as asking students to interpret the attendance policy at the beginning of class to then revise it based on student feedback as well as surveying students throughout the semester about their needs for attendance flexibility and suggestions for alternate ways of class engagement.

Programmatic and University Policy Recommendations

A trauma-informed approach to policy design acknowledges that rigid, one-size-fits-all policies can be retraumatizing (Reid, 2021; Venet, 2021). While individual instructors can implement flexible attendance policies, institutional structures must support them in doing so. Universities must take an active role in codifying mental health accessibility, preparing students to navigate workplace policies, and fostering systemic change. Technical writers can play a key role in this process by designing policies, conducting research, and developing faculty resources that prioritize accessibility from the outset.

Codifying Flexibility and Accountability in Attendance Policies

Trauma-informed pedagogy recognizes that students may struggle with attendance for a variety of reasons, many of which are not formally documented or easily disclosed. Requiring medical or disability documentation assumes a level of institutional trust and financial access that many students do not have (Dolmage, 2017), often reinforcing stigma and retraumatizing those seeking support. To address this, universities must codify mental health as a legitimate reason for excused absences while ensuring that accountability measures are clearly defined and equitably applied. Like a student with a broken bone who may require temporary accommodations, students experiencing mental health challenges should be able to self-certify absences without excessive bureaucratic hurdles. However, this flexibility must be integrated within institutional frameworks that maintain course integrity and funding compliance. For example, if in-person instruction is a funding requirement, institutions must develop policies that accommodate mental health needs without compromising essential attendance requirements.

To achieve this balance, institutions should:

- Explicitly recognize mental health as a valid reason for absence in attendance policies without requiring formal documentation.
- Pair flexibility with structured accountability measures that align with institutional and accreditation requirements, ensuring that students remain responsible for coursework while being supported.
- Train faculty on implementing trauma-informed attendance policies, ensuring that accountability measures do not become punitive barriers for students with mental health challenges.
- Conduct institutional policy analyses using Williams' (2022) framework to identify implicit definitions of flexibility and accountability, making these measures transparent to students.

Brown & Ramlackhan (2022) emphasize that accessibility must be embedded at the policy level rather than treated as an individual issue. Similarly, universal design principles advocate for proactive inclusion rather than reactive accommodation (Walters, 2010). Technical writers and policy designers can contribute by developing standardized policy language, creating faculty resources, and ensuring that institutional guidelines reflect a trauma-informed balance of flexibility and accountability.

By structuring attendance policies around these principles, institutions can move beyond reactive accommodations and toward a model where accessibility and academic rigor coexist within a supportive learning environment.

The Role of Institutions in Workforce Transition

While trauma-informed pedagogy fosters more equitable classrooms, universities must also prepare students for the realities of workplace policies. Social justice pedagogy often teaches students to critique oppressive structures (Hashlamon & Teston, 2022; Jones, 2016), but it does not always equip them with the tools to navigate and advocate within these systems. Trauma-informed pedagogy offers a more nuanced approach by first addressing students' own lived experiences before teaching them to advocate for others.

One of the most effective ways to bridge this gap is through real-world engagement with advocacy scenarios. Teaching students how and when to disclose a disability to obtain a workplace accommodation, for example, not only prepares them to advocate for their own needs but also deepens their understanding of advocacy as a broader skill. Students who are not personally impacted by trauma can benefit from this learning as well, as it helps them avoid the simplistic view that traumatized individuals simply need to "advocate for themselves." Through these exercises, all students can better grasp the complexities and potential risks of disclosure, the challenges of navigating accommodations, and the systemic barriers that often undermine those efforts. This broader understanding prevents students from overlooking the intricacies of advocacy and helps them develop more empathetic and effective strategies for supporting marginalized individuals in both workplace and societal contexts.

To further support the transition from school to the workforce, institutions and programs should:

- Provide training on workplace advocacy, helping students understand their rights and how to negotiate accommodations in professional settings.
- Create experiential learning opportunities that require students to engage with real-world advocacy challenges, such as developing accessibility audits or practicing disclosure conversations.
- Collaborate with employers to develop more flexible workplace policies that integrate trauma-informed principles.

- Incorporate user experience (UX) design principles (Crane & Cargile Cook, 2022) into curriculum design, ensuring students engage with real-world policy scenarios that balance efficiency with accessibility.

Simply teaching students about workplace rigidity without addressing systemic inequities risks reinforcing exclusionary practices (Hatcher & Gabriel, 2024). By equipping all students with the tools to understand and navigate both personal and institutional barriers, institutions can foster graduates who are not only prepared to advocate for themselves but are also better positioned to support and advocate for others. Accessibility must be more than an individual responsibility—it must be an institutional and societal commitment.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented a study examining how instructors develop, implement, and enforce attendance policies, albeit with a small sample of participants. Our research indicates that a variety of factors impact an instructor's approach to attendance policies, and from this exploratory analysis, we identified two major themes: flexibility and accountability. These themes reflect the tension many instructors experience when crafting policies that balance student inclusivity with institutional demands. However, these practices, while well-meaning, can still risk retraumatizing students, particularly those who have faced past dismissals or inadequate support. Ultimately, we argue that trauma-informed pedagogy provides a critical framework for instructors—not just in technical communication, but across higher education—to design and implement policies that ensure both student safety and growth. By applying the principles of trauma-informed pedagogy—safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment—academic institutions can begin to address the implicit structures that often undermine accessibility.

However, we acknowledge several limitations in this study. First, we did not collect demographic data on our instructor participants, which could have illuminated important cultural nuances in the ways different instructors approach attendance policies. Additionally, we did not gather student perspectives, which could have provided deeper insights into how students (especially those of various sociocultural backgrounds and bodily needs) perceive and experience the tension between flexibility and accountability. Further, additional principles of trauma-informed pedagogy such as mutuality and meaning may be applied in studies involving student participation. These gaps underscore the need for future research that incorporates both demographic data and student voices to further understand how different groups navigate and are impacted by attendance policies.

The opening student narrative has a hopeful ending. Despite the barriers to accessibility and retraumatization they faced throughout their academic journey, they are about to graduate with their PhD. This narrative reflects the resilience of many students, but it also highlights a painful truth: students who experience retraumatization due to institutional policies and authority figures are far less likely to have the same outcome as the student in our narrative, often feeling forced to leave academia after repeated struggles with the system. This story underscores the importance of creating a more welcoming and accessible academic environment, where students are not required to disclose their trauma or vulnerability in just the right way, to just the right people, in order to gain the flexibility they need to succeed.

While this study focused on instructors in the English department, we argue that the principles of trauma-informed pedagogy should be expanded across all disciplines. Technical communicators, in particular, are uniquely positioned to conduct more policy analysis within institutional contexts, making the often implicit work of educators more explicit. By analyzing and addressing the policies that shape the classroom experience, educators and researchers alike can make meaningful contributions to dismantling barriers to access and inclusion in academia. We encourage technical communicators to take up this work, expanding the scope of research to include both the policy perspectives of instructors and the lived experiences of students.

It is time for academic institutions to reflect on their policies and practices and consider how they can be more inclusive from the outset. Rather than asking students to disclose their trauma to gain access to flexibility and support, we must build systems of care that do not rely on individual vulnerability. By fostering transparency, flexibility, and accountability in the classroom—and grounding these efforts in trauma-informed principles—we can create a more just and accessible academic environment for all students, helping them not just survive, but thrive, in their educational journeys.

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Appendix

Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. What values or principles guide your process for developing and implementing an attendance policy?
2. What stakeholders do you consider when developing your attendance policies and how do you consider them?
3. Are there any mental or physical health concerns, both from your students and your own, that you consider when creating your attendance policy? If any, how do you address these health concerns, and with whom?
4. What influences your design of the attendance policies? Did you look for example syllabi? Did you talk to fellow instructors or seek feedback from your students?
5. How have you changed your attendance policies over time? What has caused you to revise your attendance policy in the past? How have you arrived at the current version?
6. How do you communicate the attendance policy to students?
7. How do you implement your attendance policy? Do you engage students in anyway or invite their contribution/feedback?
8. How do you enforce your attendance policy? What is your most common response when a student notifies you about missing a class?
9. Have your students struggled with your attendance policies and why? How do you respond to those struggles?
10. What changes would you like to make about your current attendance policy in the future, if any, and why?

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Justice and Intercultural Issues in Service-Learning Pedagogy: An Empirical Study

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Abstract This article reports on focus groups conducted with scholars and teachers of technical and professional communication whose pedagogy is informed via service-learning (SL) or community engagement. With the relatively recent turn to social justice in TPC alongside longer term conversations about intercultural communication, we aimed to investigate how service-learning courses embrace the practical concepts of social justice and intercultural communication and translate those concepts into addressing the material imbalances they might encounter in the workplace and beyond. With the analysis of these focus groups, we offer empirical evidence that will contribute to understandings of how programmatic actions in TPC address issues of social justice and intercultural communication in service-learning programs. We suggest that social justice-informed SL, when thoughtfully developed as a part of TPC curricula, can help advance the long-term goals of social justice and cultivate transferable skills that students can take further into their career.

Keywords community engagement, empirical research, focus groups, intercultural communication, service-learning, social justice

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Introduction

Service-learning (SL) has been a mainstay of TPC curricula since scholars like Thomas N. Huckin (1997) published work on the subject. SL is valued as a "path to virtue" (Dubinsky, 2002); civic engagement through cultural studies (Scott, 2004); technology (Turnley, 2007); as well as in online and distance learning (Bourelle, 2014). Scholars have established SL as a practical pedagogy that merges student learning and community service with a goal to improve both the learning and the community (Carter et al., 2003; Butin, 2010; Huckin, 1997). Catherine Matthews and Beverly B. Zimmerman (1999) defined SL as "experiential learning" (p. 384) given that learning occurs through the experience of providing service in support of community needs. Still, while the "service" in SL suggests that students do good for the community, SL is more complex in a few different ways. First, it is typically a component of curricula designed primarily to enhance student learning, and less to support the community. David A. Delaine et.al.'s (2022) systematic literature review of SL and community engagement in engineering established that because SL pedagogy is oriented toward the professionalization of students, scant attention is paid to community partners.

The difference between SL and community engagement, as Pamela Reynolds (2009) offered, is that where SL is "structured teaching and learning," to enable students to offer community service, community engagement centers the community as a recipient of service. Another complexity arises when SL is considered charity work, as Rebecca Walton, Kristen R. Moore, and Natasha N. Jones (2019) have noted. And a third complexity emerges as students who do SL work are often in more privileged positions than the communities they serve. As Ntimi Mtawa and Merridy Wilson-Strydom (2018) found, "complex relations of power and privilege" are frequently in play "particularly in the context of extreme poverty in communities" that are often served (p. 249). Moreover, Dan W. Butin (2010) observed that in SL programs, "students typically have greater social privilege" than the communities they serve (p. 125). Yet what is not always evident from these incursions into communities is noticeable, lasting change. As Butin (2015) wrote, "few students envision SL through a justice oriented lens" and even fewer faculty know how to structure a SL course to foster social justice (p. 8) because it is not often considered the object of the SL curriculum.

This article reports on an empirical study of how social justice and intercultural approaches in technical and professional communication inform SL curricula and pedagogies in practice. The initial phase of the study involved a 2020 survey of 55 TPC teachers and administrators about their experiences with, practices for enacting, and attitudes toward social justice and intercultural communication in TPC (Baniya et al., 2022). Through our earlier survey, we were able to identify what courses are reported as sites of SL projects as well as participants' self-reported perceptions about social justice in SL. In addition, we outlined four themes related to the application of social justice and intercultural communication theories to SL: activities, constraints, points of resistance, and goals and outcomes. Ultimately, we suggested that TPC administrators and programs "incorporate training in social justice pedagogies within graduate programs—especially where graduate instructors may be teaching TPC courses—as well as TPC programs more generally; and develop localized frameworks" (Baniya et al., 2022, p. 366). We followed this survey research by conducting focus groups, in hopes of gaining a fuller understanding of how TPC teachers and administrators enact social justice and engage intercultural issues in SL; we report on our findings in this article.

The impetus for this project follows from our concern that SL programs bring into sharp focus the divide between town and gown, owing in part to the non-profit status that many universities hold, which exempts them from paying taxes that would otherwise further contribute to uplifting and developing the communities around them. This status quo in turn imbues the university with ivory tower status. Without making efforts to step out of that tower and create inroads within the communities in which universities are located, but also social, economic, environmental, and cultural consequences will linger long after many SL projects are conducted among them. One of the ways universities have attempted to bridge this chasm is through community-engaged collaborations through SL, where students work with communities and improve their learning engagement as a result.

This project sought to identify where and how teachers of SL in technical communication enact their commitments to social justice and intercultural communication in practice. We were interested in understanding the process of designing and implementing SL programs by gathering experiences from program administrators and teachers. Towards this goal, we conducted three focus groups with 14 teachers, program administrators, and scholars of technical communication who helped us gain a clearer sense of how social justice and intercultural communication has been incorporated into TPC courses and programs across a range of post-secondary institutions and communities. With the analysis of these focus groups, we extend previous scholarship (Baniya, et al., 2022), offering additional empirical evidence that helps us understand how programmatic actions in TPC clarify issues of social justice and intercultural communication in SL programs. In the following sections, we provide a brief overview of literature, we describe our research methods, and we report on the thematic results of our research.

Defining Terms

When we use the term *social justice*, we draw on TPC scholars such as Natasha N. Jones and Rebecca Walton (2018) who have established that social justice aims to "amplify the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, politically, and/or economically under-resourced" (p. 242). In the context of this work, to achieve social justice through SL, programs must meaningfully attend to the needs of the often-oppressed communities with which they partner. Indeed, Angela M. Haas and Michelle F. Eble (2018) offered that social justice "explicitly seek[s] to redistribute and reassemble—or otherwise redress—power imbalances that systematically and systemically disenfranchise some stakeholders while privileging others" (p. 3). Moreover, doing social justice work entails being explicit and intentional when engaging acts of oppression and seeking out just action at all times (Walton et. al, 2018). In this study, we contend that SL occasions opportunities for not just learning, and service, but can also be a means for attaining social justice.

As we noted in "Revisiting SL in TPC Through Social Justice and Intercultural Frameworks: Findings from Survey Research" (2022), although intercultural communication is often perceived as a distinct area of inquiry separate from SL and social justice conversations in TPC, "social justice frequently relies on the ability to communicate effectively between and across cultures and across differently positioned subjectivities" (p. 5). Given that we understand intercultural communication as not being limited to communication across differences in nationality but also includes the more nuanced cultural differences that occur when people come from different educational, class, ethnic, and other backgrounds, we understand such theories as important for social justice-informed SL, as well as for effective TPC more broadly. Indeed, Godwin Y. Agboka (2014) has asserted that "intercultural communication and the objectives of social justice are interconnected" (p. 304). In other words, to engage in social justice generally requires an ability to communicate with members of under-resourced communities with self-reflexivity, and the propensity to decenter and situate one's own experiences and naturalized ways of knowing" (p. 357)—practices that are integral to intercultural communication. For example, students involved in SL programs must often learn to work effectively with community members from different cultural, class, and educational backgrounds and who live based on a different set of experiences, values and norms.

Thus, we argue that given the complexities of SL described in the introduction to this article, pairing SL with intercultural communication for achieving social justice might bring about a different paradigm that is reciprocal and mutually beneficial between the two entities. Such a paradigm would entail creating learning outcomes that include intercultural communication and social justice with a problem-solving disposition. And, of course, problems cannot be solved until they are articulated and understood. When students can articulate the core problems afflicting the respective communities with whom they engage, they might equip themselves with the kind of knowledge that would be targeted and directed towards restoring these communities. In short, our study is built upon the notion that SL, intercultural communication, and social justice conversations in TPC can and should be in dialogue with one another.

With the relatively recent turn to social justice alongside the longer-term engagement with intercultural communication in TPC, we wanted to investigate how SL courses embrace the practical concepts of social justice and translate those concepts into addressing the imbalances students might encounter in the workplace and beyond. In addition to that, we wanted to investigate pedagogies of intercultural communication and how such pedagogies are designed and implemented in these quasi-workplaces. It is evident that in various SL partnerships students get an opportunity to work with community members from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, perspectives, and subjectivities, and intercultural communication is an area that can prepare students to thoughtfully and reflectively engage in this kind of work. Hence, in this multisite curricular study, we investigate how TPC programs in the U.S. implement social justice and intercultural-oriented SL pedagogy in and with their communities.

Literature Review: Service-Learning in TPC

Over the past two decades, there has been growing interest in incorporating SL in technical and professional communication programs. Many teachers and scholars of technical communication have conducted research and written about the successes, challenges, and also issues with embedding SL in technical communication programs. As a result of SL programs, students have reportedly sharpened their career goals; as Parul Chaube (2020) wrote, SL experiences "allowed us to further develop and exhibit leadership over small portions of the project and focused on the multicultural communication goal of the class" (25). Likewise, the organizations with which students are paired can also benefit from expanded networks with members of the institution, including students with whom they might form lifelong connections. In a collaborative article written by Rebecca Walton, Jared S. Colton, Rikki Wheately-Boxx, and Krista Gurko (2016), community partners Wheatley-Boxx and Gurko wrote "defining and reflecting upon foundational issues such as social justice, privilege, and social change, students become better prepared to apply skills and concepts beyond a single course or organization" (126). In this way, social justice-informed SL, when thoughtfully developed as a part of TPC curricula, can help advance the long-term goals of social justice and cultivate transferable skills that students can take further into their career.

Matthews and Zimmerman (1999) conducted a qualitative study in which they “implemented SL as a core part of a project management course” (p. 384). Their study uncovered challenges related to student collaboration, a tension they attributed to the lack of uniformity with the technical documents associated with the various components of the project. Because it was left to students to decide on the structure of the documents, they struggled to determine how accurately they were completing their tasks. David Alan Sapp and Robbin D. Crabtree (2002), for whom SL is “a pedagogical theory and method of experiential education” designed to help students to develop “civic responsibility” (p. 412), implemented SL in three TPC-focused projects including healthcare documents for rural Spanish speakers along the US-Mexico border; reports developed in partnership with a number of social service agencies; and document design for a local business. Their work demonstrated examples of the valuable partnerships that arise when learning and service converge. For Danielle Nielsen (2016), complications arise when SL is offered in the online TC classroom. For example, students may be put in a position where they must find their own service assignments (p. 241). Thus, placement for online learning students for SL becomes a problem. One way to contend with this issue is to establish students’ positionalities via the communities they wish to engage. Doing so enables an interrogation of the inherent power asymmetries between students and communities and might activate a sense of engagement with the community in ways that motivate social change.

SL pedagogy has long been touted as a sufficient perspective for technical communicators interested in improving civic engagement among students. In TPC, SL has been advanced to help “to develop students’ civic awareness and engagement” (Jones, 2016, p. 355). SL that emphasizes fellowship and coalitions can “bring together multiple ways of understanding the world and analyzing the oppressive structures within it,” enhancing community alliances and interrogating the connections among pedagogy, theory, and practice (Bell, 2007, p. 14). This approach is useful to technical communication because it foregrounds relationships based on genuine collaborations and cooperation with other scholars, participants, and communities. In addition, the participatory approaches often used in SL encourage empathy as a conduit to understanding and advocacy. And such views reflect James M. Dubinsky’s (2002) note of caution regarding the need to strike a balance between service and learning—between community partners and students.

Before the social justice turn, educators engaged in a wide array of activities that brought learners to communities (see Dubinsky, 2002). Such community-institutional partnerships involved students doing work that ostensibly benefited the communities in question. The results of these SL outreaches, however, often augmented student learning more than they benefited the communities in question (d'Arlach, Sánchez, and Feuer, 2009). This point is reflected by the mere fact that the injustices that necessitate SL outreach continue to persist (Baniya et al., 2022).

From a programmatic point of view, while SL has been widely adopted in TPC programs and in the academy in general, its reach with respect to social justice and intercultural communication has not been as widely felt (see Bocci, 2015; Mitchell, 2015). Indeed, as Nancy W. Coppola, Norbert Elliot, and Faye Newsham (2016) observed, social justice and intercultural communication pedagogy can now more overtly expose students to differential opportunities and outcomes; critically assess the structural conditions that perpetuate injustices and engage students in coalition building and other social justice initiatives that can dismantle and topple these structures. Kirk St.Amant (2021) listed some programmatic opportunities that have arisen in the wake of a global pandemic such as internationalizing research-based projects, working in "globally distributed contexts," and "addressing local problems" (pp. 2–5). These opportunities do inform a more capacious programmatic outlook to SL, intercultural communication, and social justice pedagogy. The opportunity to partner with international organizations, for example, allows for developing skills such as "teleworking" (p. 6). Similarly, St.Amant suggests that emerging "local problems" can offer opportunities for internationalizing online education (p. 16) by drawing on the expertise of community members who are the custodians of local knowledge as well as from their international student-partners.

Culturally speaking, SL can pedagogically benefit from the communities with who they partner. Consider that classrooms on college campuses are rarefied spaces that grant access to credentialed individuals with pre-approved metrics of expertise and qualifications. SL partners may not operate freely in such spaces. But if we grant that they have knowledge worthy of imparting to students, then we can make room in our programs to permit instruction on turfs where they can fully exercise agency and fortitude. Educators can relate more equitably with community partners and invite them to be more than passive recipients of the service offered through SL programs. Community partners can contribute actively to shaping the goals and processes of SL projects, and, preferably with compensation, participate in lectures, facilitate class discussions, and engage in activities related to learning about them and their organization. Educators can more directly tap community expertise to draw on their knowledge directly so that there is less separation between class pedagogy and SL as learned within communities. To this end, Michael Carter, Chris M. Anson & Carolyn R. Miller (2003) found it useful for TPC courses to "create learning outcomes" to help clarify the nature of principles and skills students will gain and to bring together disciplinary content and (community) application (p. 108).

SL is considered valuable in cultivating citizenship by providing opportunities for service to not just learners, but also faculty and ultimately their respective institutions. It is different from internship and other forms of apprenticeship, where the immediate focus is to inculcate skills and induct employees into workplace discourse culture. Sapp and Crabtree (2002) called for "integrating service-learning projects into technical communication courses" in order to build technical skills and apply them as needed (p. 417). SL in fact illuminates the value of the field beyond its vocational bent; it demonstrates community outreach and is conducive for "socially relevant" and by extension, ethical "research" (p. 425). Because SL often involves community outreach, administration buy-in is necessary. A heightened interest in SL might attract resources and training and might lead to more outreach to the community in ways that are beneficial to both the community and the institution. After all, community partners are known to "accommodate" requests from institutions and their students. For this reason, "service should not benefit students to the detriment of the community" (p. 425).

Sapp and Crabtree (2002) cautioned against the programmatic institution of SL lest it promotes antipathy to uninterested faculty. Instead, they recommend that interested faculty, committed to "the philosophy of education for citizenship," be supported in this endeavor (p. 426). Such faculty can gradually develop more expansive learning outcomes and increasingly student projects. Above all, relations with community members c evolve to where each other's needs can be reciprocated. "Service learning, then, can be seen as a companion laboratory as much focused on applying academic skills as on creating responsible participants in democratic life" (p. 427).

Research Methods

This section details the methods of our focus group research that made up the second part of our two-part IRB-approved study. The larger project, "Service Learning in Technical and Professional Communication through Social Justice and Intercultural Frameworks: A Multisite Study" was reviewed, determined to have IRB-exempt status, and approved (see Appendix B). The goal of the study was to gather data from multiple technical and professional communication instructors at universities across the country in order to help us understand how TPC commitments to intercultural communication, social justice, antiracism and equity inform the implementation of SL on the ground. In general, we hoped to better understand how social justice, intercultural communication, and SL inform (if at all) the larger goal of bringing about meaningful and material social change, such as more equitable distribution of material resources across the community, providing support for marginalized community members, enhancing accessibility, or otherwise "[amplifying] the agency of oppressed people" (Jones and Walton, 2018, p. 242).

Following survey research of TPC faculty and administrators, we conducted three focus groups in March 2022. We chose to use focus groups as the method for this part of the study as a way to help us gather fuller perspectives on how social justice and intercultural frameworks are conceived and implemented in the context of SL in TPC courses and programs. Additionally, because they are conversational, focus groups would enable participants to build on one another's ideas, thus yielding potentially richer insights. They would also enable us to learn from more varied perspectives than we would have been able to do through interviews or other means alone. We collectively developed our focus group questions in a series of meetings as we were working on our IRB protocol (see Appendix C) to have them ready for review by our respective IRBs. The focus group questions were developed to elicit some description of participants': 1) personal commitments to social justice, 2) institutional contexts within which they were working, and 3) concrete practices and methods that they used to engage with communities and facilitate and institute SL projects in TPC.

Focus group participants were largely self-selected; they were individuals who had responded to the survey that we distributed earlier and from which we reported the initial results (Baniya et al., 2022). Conditions for survey respondents were that participants identify as instructors of TPC who also have an interest in teaching social justice. Although we had indicated that participants needed only to be interested in teaching social justice in SL, we found that all participants had experience teaching SL in TPC. At the conclusion of the survey, participants were invited to indicate their willingness to participate in a focus group discussion. Out of 55 total survey participants, 15 indicated on the survey that they would be willing to participate in a focus group. We contacted all 15 respondents who indicated their willingness to participate in a focus group using the recruitment email in Appendix A. Among the 15 people we contacted, 14 were able to participate given scheduling constraints. All focus group participants received a $50 gift card for their participation.

All three focus groups took place late in March 2022, during the COVID pandemic. We note this context because the kinds of experiences people were sharing and interactions they were having were limited by social distancing and the conditions that were prevailing at the time. Given the context, we held the three focus group sessions using the virtual platform Zoom to both (a) offer video and phone choices to our participants and (b) ensure a diversity of participants from different institutional contexts to hear, learn, and engage with one another. The research team met in advance of the first focus group to prepare. The focus groups were 90 minutes in length each, and they were recorded using Zoom's record feature. The focus groups ranged from two to seven participants in size, not including facilitators. This variation was purely a result of participants' scheduling availability.

To start the focus group discussions, both the facilitators and participants were asked to introduce themselves and situate their teaching and research interests in TPC. They were also encouraged to state whether or not their programs had majors or minors in TPC as that would have some bearing for curricular information. Although we asked the same questions in each focus group session, our conversations about intercultural communication, social justice, and SL varied largely because of the lived experiences and institutional contexts of our participants. Our first focus group consisted of five participants from five different institutions, in five different states. Our second focus group included two participants from the same university. Our final focus group included seven participants from six different universities. Participants were a mix of tenure track assistant and associate professors, adjunct and other non-tenure track professors, and graduate student instructors. Given these various factors, our study is not intended to be a universal statement of how all TPC instructors and administrators work toward social justice and intercultural oriented SL; instead, this is an analysis of how several of our TPC colleagues have engaged with social justice and intercultural SL in practice.

After the focus groups were conducted, we had the recordings transcribed using Rev, a transcription service. We each read and reread the transcripts separately in order to look for themes in the interest of coming up with codes associated with the questions we had posed in the survey. We entered our codes into a shared spreadsheet where we were able to compare and contrast them against each other. We then met and discussed what codes we had in common, before collaboratively developing a coding scheme based on five emergent codes:

1. **"social justice" use**—in other words, where participants provided explanations of how "social justice" and social justice frameworks were used in SL courses, programs, and institutions more broadly;
2. **activities, strategies, and practices** for addressing or designing social justice/intercultural SL projects;
3. **challenges and "failures"** in social justice/intercultural SL;
4. **context, support, and other factors** that influenced participants' ability to do social justice/intercultural SL; and
5. **programmatic and pedagogical recommendations** for social justice/intercultural SL.

After we developed this coding scheme, we each individually went back and coded the three transcripts manually (see Lauer, Brumberger, and Beveridge, 2018). We then copied our coded data to a shared spreadsheet for comparison and discussion. One byproduct of making use of Zoom was that we not only had our spoken conversation, but we were also able to make use of the chat feature, which we invited participants to use as part of our opening to the focus groups. We capture some of the Zoom chat data in our results section as well.

Results

In this section, we present our focus group results. The results are organized under the five themes that emerged from our coding of the focus group data: (a) "social justice" use within the context of SL, (b) activities, strategies, and practices for developing social justice/intercultural SL, (c) challenges and failures in social justice/intercultural SL, (d) context and support for social justice/intercultural SL, and (e) programmatic and pedagogical recommendations for social justice/intercultural SL.

"Social Justice" Use in Service Learning

This section discusses how participants used the language of "social justice" within the context of SL. This theme included the kinds of SL projects that participants described as being informed by social justice, and or intercultural communication. Participants additionally disclosed what informed their approach to projects related to SL, be they personal experiences and commitments, scholarship, professional experiences, pandemic issues, and the institutional context. We were interested to know the various factors that influenced how instructors think about designing a project that aims to address the goals of social justice as they understood them.

The code "social justice" use was applied to moments when participants noted or explained how "social justice" and social justice frameworks were being used in their TPC courses, programs, and institutions more broadly and specifically in SL contexts. As stated earlier, we based our definition of social justice on the work of Jones and Walton (2018) to "amplify the agency of oppressed people" (p. 241). This is the definition we provided participants so that when we mentioned social justice, we had a shared understanding of the term. We proceeded with the belief that coding for specific usages of "social justice" among participants would usefully provide us with a sense of how the concept and language of social justice was actually being applied in TPC programs, projects, and SL courses. In brief, we found that: (a) conceptions and applications of social justice frameworks in SL were informed by institutional commitments that occasionally changed over time, (b) efforts to do social justice work in SL are at times challenged by larger state political climates, (c) social justice efforts within SL contexts can be rooted in efforts to impact material flows of resources as well as student dispositions, and (d) the scope of social justice can be a complicated question.

When asked about what SL, community engagement, and social justice means within the context of their TPC programs, we found that there is, not surprisingly, variation in institutional and programmatic social justice commitments. Several participants described how social justice was either embedded—or largely absent from—the fabric of either their university or their TPC program and programmatic goals, which impacted their ability to incorporate social justice-informed SL. At times, social justice was "just threaded throughout all of the classes in our curriculum." Moreover, how social justice is embedded within institutions changes over time; one participant shared:

> I think the social justice focus has become much more explicit over my last 10 years and teaching in [my] institution. And I think for a variety of reasons, both what has shaped the world in the last decade, but also those experiences within the classroom with students who are grappling with issues. So just the question of connecting it to social justice feels like it's both been latent but making it much more explicit for students.

In short, this participant described how their institution's commitment to social justice became more explicit over time, illustrating how much shared commitments to social justice between instructor or individual and the larger unit can impact the application of social justice pedagogies in SL, as well as in the teaching of TPC courses broadly. Such efforts are at times tied to and supported by the mission of an institution, and there is occasionally a disconnect between an instructor's pedagogical attention to social justice and the larger program's commitment to social justice—both of which may impact the degree to which such approaches are applied in the teaching of SL. Because social justice frameworks center the oppressed, SL efforts informed by this approach can strategically foreground the lived experiences and everyday lives of the communities who engage in such partnerships, with a goal to bring about material change. From this centering, a shared language and understanding can lead to coalition building.

Another participant shared that their institution's mission helps them do social justice work, noting:

> Our mission is in the De La Salle tradition, which is Catholic. Teaching communities and the whole person are part of the kind of key features of the De La Salle mission. So, there is an inherent social justice element. And we are also a DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] school. So, we have a really interesting and diverse student population.

This participant's acknowledgment of the presence of undocumented students brings into focus the need to address issues that concern such students—issues of justice and of intercultural communication. That, coupled with the university's mission that "responds to the needs of the disadvantaged" means that centering social justice would be in keeping with the mission and vision of the institution. To promote social action, SL projects can prompt intercultural discussions in which minoritized students can freely discuss the unique challenges they encounter. In turn, these forums become educational and can result in the kinds of support structures these students need in the form of mentorship, the development of culturally responsive pedagogy, and even advocacy.

While social justice was easier to implement for some because of programming and even their school's stated mission, other participants noted some of the real challenges connecting to social justice in their learning environment. One participant said, "we're in a state where currently the university is kind of being targeted as a political pawn in the governor's race, and critical race theory." Another participant noted that their program was still working to understand how to implement social justice practices across the program: "As for social justice and intercultural communication, I think it's striking to me that we all, a bunch of us, are interested in doing it. We do it in our classrooms, but I don't know that it's happening programmatically." In many ways, the situation described here is rather common in social justice and intercultural communication pedagogy as it is in SL pedagogy, as it can be easier and quicker to implement things at an individual level than at a larger-scale programmatic level. In addition, we note that this participant specifically reinforced intercultural communication as a topic that is perhaps integral yet distinct from social justice.

In addition to institutional commitments, one participant who had maintained deep ties with their home community described their overarching goal and vision for doing social justice work in SL as being focused on "divert[ing] university resources toward my people." This reparative disposition toward SL for social justice that focuses on the flow of material resources was the most explicit yet, and it demonstrates a compelling approach for amplifying the agency of the oppressed. In other words, SL is often imagined in ways that divide communities from the postsecondary institutions within which many of us work; however, culture comes with all of us. This statement from the participant reflects their positionality, their ties to their community, and shows how that rootedness results in a commitment that goes beyond fulfilling academic and pedagogical tasks. Still, the participant acknowledged that the ability to do this kind of social justice work is contingent on institutional position, access to resources, and one's position in the academic power structure. Graduate students often have less power and fewer resources compared to tenure-track faculty members who may have start-up or other research funds from which to draw. Still, this participant's response displays a robust understanding of the ways in which SL projects further reify inequities outside the academy, as well as an approach for resisting this tendency. It also demonstrates the complexity of doing meaningful social justice-informed SL, given its dependence on resources that faculty alone may not be able to access.

At least one participant also spoke about social justice in terms of affecting student values and commitments. They suggest that social justice in SL is "a way of engaging students with the broader world and trying to show them that they can use their gifts, talents, but particularly their skills that they're developing at college, in different ways." In this way, participants show how the language of social justice gets used for not only attending to the material flows of resources but also in terms of impacting embodied, individual values, dispositions, and commitments toward a socially-just mindset. There are documented cases of students supporting communities through translation to address linguistic injustices and in creating multimodal texts for access and portability (Gonzales, 2018). Actions that are deliberately inclusive can help individuals understand the work that they do as important and may engender trust across SL partnerships.

Finally, another participant noted a felt tension when it comes to the scope of social justice work, stating, "There is an interesting break between the international emphasis and the local" when we talk about social justice. This comment was interesting to us as it suggests how social justice is taken up and imagined can vary in terms of scope, distance, and in terms of the relationship between those affiliated with postsecondary institutions and the local and international communities who may be impacted by particular social justice issues and commitment. In some ways, this local/international tension reflects similar tensions in conversations about intercultural communication. Importantly, there seems to be an underlying suggestion that these questions of scope in discussions of social justice are perhaps politically and culturally complicated, as reflected by white saviorism tendencies that look to "fix" or "help" with problems "over there," as opposed to addressing injustices within our own backyards and in which we might feel more apparently implicated. Notably, as we learn from Agboka (2014), faculty can position community partners as participants in the project of learning and not merely as recipients of service. This would help to dispense with the savior ethos.

Activities, Strategies, Practices for Developing Social Justice/Intercultural Service-Learning

This section describes the code "activities, strategies, practices for addressing or designing social justice/intercultural SL projects." This code refers to moments when participants described intentionally designed assignments, lessons, projects, and curricula to address social justice and intercultural learning within their SL projects and programs. It also includes approaches and actions taken in the process of project development and implementation. For example, one participant explained that what "we are teaching should be problem-based, should be rooted in the community, should be to solve problems because problems aren't solved just theoretically, they have to be solved with people." Additionally, another participant echoed this need while discussing conceptual ways to do so, through a focus on location and modality:

> we have to expand the rhetorical triangle to be more three-dimensional reader-writer, text, location and modality. Modality is technology or distribution. And location can be working in a community, seeing what the community's needs are, or issues of inclusion and trying to figure out what we have not been looking for with just reader, writer and text.

For both of these participants, there is a clear notion that social justice and intercultural-informed SL projects are built from community needs, to address problems that community members are facing. In addition, these responses speak to pedagogy, theory, and practice. The participants allude to the preparatory work they do in order to facilitate student learning in SL projects. Participants also point to the need to expand our theoretical understanding of the rhetorical triangle to intersect with community, service, and social justice. Because SL projects are designed to meet specific community needs at a given time, their design might be iterative from initializing, assessing, before integration into a larger curriculum. As this was a multisite study comprising faculty from multiple institutions across the country, we noted how drawing attention to local concerns is critical as it enables to more targeted ways of working with communities. Community needs vary from location to location, and it is those community needs upon which structured interactions of SL are constructed.

In addition to approaches for developing the goals and purposes of social justice and intercultural-informed SL projects, at least one participant noted methods that they used to connect and maintain relationships across students and community partners:

> In any of the client or community projects that I work, we have a pretty locked down structure of the students communicating with the clients and I get cc'd and also I am surveying the clients at the midpoint and at the end point of how it's going.

This participant aptly highlights the need to facilitate, guide, and manage student communication with community partners in social justice and interculturally informed SL. We surmise that this is perhaps because of the cultural, material, and embodied differences that exist across students and community partners, and thus a way that the participant is instantiating intercultural communication theory. The need for evaluation and checking in with both students and community partners during the process is what helped one participant understand the power of reflection throughout the teaching process. As studies have shown, SL in itself is not inherently valuable as a pedagogical approach until it is paired with student reflection on their experience (Turnley, 2007). As one participant put it:

> I know that these relationships have to be reciprocal, like students have to benefit and the organizations have to benefit. But I have tilted more to the students who have to benefit, they have to benefit right now. And I hope we can support the organizations, but I really set up the expectations with them is that... And I'm working with undergrads, many of them it's their first experience having any kind of professional relationship with somebody, because they're early undergrads. And so really having to tilt towards, let's make sure that these students are feeling safe enough to be able to have these experiences in a productive way.

This privileging of students—even if they are undergrads who are new to SL—in relation to community partners may be one of the balances we have to strike in order for both students and communities to benefit from SL as a reciprocal relationship. To make headway, care must be taken at the curriculum design stage to recognize community partners as integral to SL learning outcomes. If benefits of a reciprocal nature accrue to communities, we lessen the possibility of reinforcing existing gown/town power differentials. This issue may be alleviated through institutionally-supported professional development opportunities for instructors who are interested in creating pedagogical innovations related to community outreach.

Professional development would help instructors cultivate the kinds of expertise that students need, especially as understanding and negotiating student abilities and skillsets in light of community needs can be difficult to work through:

> I found it really hard to work with students where they don't have any expertise, even if I'm trying to teach them the expertise alongside the class … I've had a lot of problems, a lot of challenges I should say. They already can dig into centering their own experiences and knowledge that they already have and positioning it as valuable to the project and then giving them some tools and skills along the way to bring that out.

We would offer that instructors teaching SL must juggle student learning, community needs, and the kinds of expertise students *do* have in ways that fit larger course and curricular goals. Given its dependence on a reciprocal institutional-community partnership, SL projects require a mutually beneficial approach, particularly if social justice is to result from them. This participant offers an important reminder of the challenges of maintaining such an approach, and the potential need for institutional support to ensure that SL projects go as smoothly as possible and SL arrangements are just.

The study participants noted how, in working with students, they try to help students understand the connections between the activity and their own personal lives. In terms of specific approaches, one participant said, "So in my project, I act as coach. That's what I say, 'I'm your coach for the class. I'm your mentor and your coach.'" Such a positioning allows the students to "bring their own experience and knowledge" into the work they are doing. While courses are semester or quarter-long, depending on the institution, this duration may limit how much work a given class can undertake to satisfy both students and communities.

In terms of connecting social justice to classroom dynamics, a participant offered that they tried to be strategic in engaging these topics:

> …strategic not just about managing our white students' lack of understanding or concerns, but also, and particularly … students of color in classrooms. The danger is not only that we activate some anxiety from white students, but then we force students who represent the groups that we would be talking about in a lot of social justice conversations, whether they're queer or Black or Latino, or whatever, they'd be forced to be representations.

This point is really a conundrum in our society at large, where discussing issues of inequity gets one branded as having a "victim mentality" while ignoring them means one is "not woke." Either way, an educational institution should be the place to broach such issues critically and without fear of recrimination, and intercultural communication can potentially be a useful approach for doing so. Subjects like these should be integrated into learning outcomes and course materials to make learning about them more structured and planned. However, as Agboka (2014) cautions, the institutional ethos within which SL projects are designed ought to be interrogated, given its invariable impact on the outcome (p. 302). The balance that this participant noted helps underscore just why intentional practices with inclusive structures are needed to run successful programs.

Challenges and "Failures" in Social Justice/Intercultural SL

With all of the positive aspects to infusing social justice and intercultural communicative practices and projects, participants also lamented the struggles that they had encountered personally and professionally. This code was particularly useful for reimagining more supportive and just infrastructures for teaching and administering SL programs. As researchers, we were prompted to critically consider the nature of support for doing this work, including in terms of building and initiating community partnerships from the start. Christine M. Hammond (1994) found that most faculty who engage in SL were motivated by student learning outcomes as well as fostering student understanding of the course content. For faculty who want to promote analytical and problem-solving skills, i.e., achieve concrete outcomes, there is little room on the syllabus for the needs of community partners, much less social justice—unless it's a core learning outcome of the course.

A few participants reported "scaled down" versions of SL projects after having been burned by more ambitious projects, as well as staying away from certain topics that might be difficult to address given the context within which they were working. Others wondered about having access to resources from grants, for instance, and how those can be "funneled back into communities" so that these communities are left a little better off at the end of the project. The nature of challenges participants expressed frequently had to do with resources, both material and human, as the enterprise was found to be "energy depleting" given the preparatory and ongoing work that goes into running SL projects and maintaining strong and ongoing relationships with community partners. There was also lack of institutional and programmatic support and, in one case, "sabotage." As well, concerns of "colonizing" when it comes to working with rural communities coupled with the perception of "pandering" when instructors attempt to immerse themselves in cultural knowledge were voiced. This, coupled with the fear that SL ventures might be disruptive to communities who now have to make room to accommodate institutional requests, can limit the kinds of interactions that social justice and intercultural-infused SL entails. We understood all of these to be legitimate concerns, and they provide the field further insight into doing this work.

Moreover, as one participant noted, there is an "inherent capitalistic nature of technical professional writing" that, particularly when coupled with student expectations, makes it hard to do social justice and intercultural-informed SL work in the first place. They expressed, "students [were] basically saying like, I'm not sure if this is business writing. Like, why are we doing this stuff?" Such questioning can deter some faculty from taking on the kind of innovative curriculum that requires student buy-in without being penalized for it by way of student evaluations. Explaining this mismatch becomes an added responsibility instructors may have to take on in their annual reflection. These circumstances can be avoided if SL and social justice are part of the department or program's stated values. This need is relevant to SL curricula situated within TPC-focused departments, as well as TPC programs or coursework in non-TPC departments where technical communication and writing is taught.

Noting that some students may not be as open to learning about the topic raises even more questions about audience readiness and the type of background work that instructors may need to prepare in order to best tackle the topics in classes. As a participant shared, "we were doing stuff like social media proposals and infographics instead of, I don't know, whatever else business students expect to happen in a professional communications class." This point speaks to the necessity of managing student expectations, and helping students to recognize how social justice and intercultural communication work is important for them to study in TPC or even in a business class for that matter. One way to contend with this complexity is to engage students' positionalities via the communities they wish to engage by examining examples of small local businesses in the community. Doing so enables an interrogation of the inherent power asymmetries between students and communities and might activate a sense of engagement with the community in ways that motivate social change. The participant also brought up the need for more opportunities to discuss pedagogy amongst fellow colleagues to advance these conversations, especially in a department where there are different specialties such as in literacy and composition studies in addition to TPC.

In discussing how to connect social justice conversations in a virtual setting, one participant offered that they have had little success operating in that environment. For another participant, they had yet to do any social justice work because as they explained, "I don't want to come at it from a colonizing viewpoint. There's a little bit of that savior, 'We're bringing you good things,' and that's not always wanted and not a good way to approach the work." This participant brings up a good point with the need to strike a delicate balance to avoid failing into a superiority complex. The participant highlights the need for meaningful approaches that are reciprocal and respectful of communities as partners rather than mere recipients of aid. If community partners are seen as integral to the project of SL and therefore indispensable to its success, this kind of fear can be mitigated. We learn from this interaction the need to structure SL as rooted in the relationships of all parties involved. The same participant noted how uneven buy-in across faculty ranks may be an issue contributing to the lack of programmatic social justice implementation, saying: "We are quite junior faculty heavy. So, there's a dynamic of trying to lead from below in the hierarchy." Doing such work can be challenging for junior faculty without tenure given that the tone for programs is often set by more senior faculty whose viewpoints are frequently prioritized in review and promotion committees. That power dynamic may cause junior faculty to restrict their curriculum to "safe" topics that do not threaten to upend the social order nor rattle the hierarchy. Stiil, the participant strikes a hopeful tone, underscoring the need to press for programmatic changes when a faculty member is able to do so.

Context and Support for Social Justice/Intercultural SL

The "context, support, and other factors that influenced participants' ability to do social justice/intercultural SL" code encapsulates the wide-ranging factors that impact SL—namely, student learning outcomes, faculty support, community partners, and the institution itself. The environment in which SL takes place is critical as it often affects the material resources, actions, and support structures for developing and carrying out SL projects and curricula. Thus, this code speaks to participants' specific institutional, departmental, and community settings that affected their ability to most effectively and responsibly do social justice and intercultural SL. This code further provides us with an understanding of what kinds of structural supports exist and are effective for enabling social justice and intercultural SL.

Many of our participants made known just how social justice initiatives were threaded into their programs sharing, for instance, "we teach [students] about technical communication through a social justice lens, so it's just threaded throughout all of the classes in our curriculum." Thus, the support for programming is inherently provided for these faculty members. Others, however, did not have the same support in their institution contexts; one participant communicated:

> My thoughts about participating in a focus group on service-learning and community engagement are that I'm hoping to learn something. I'm excited to hear about the ways other folks have done it. I feel like I've tried really hard to follow best practices, and I've been a little disappointed in some of the outcomes for my own classes, and so I've pulled back. And so I'm hoping that perhaps I can learn some things that will help me in my classes do a better job of specifically reciprocity. So I'm stoked about it.

Another participant made sure to highlight what it can feel like to work in such a context, particularly when coming from a program that did take on social justice as a mission and program goal. Specifically, they shared how acknowledging and declaring their practices brings a certain level of visibility to their classroom:

> [social justice work was] something that I, as a student, was doing in these classes, but then also as now somebody that's on faculty and has a lot more power, it's funny, when I was a grad student, those choices didn't feel as radical, but as a faculty member in a program that doesn't say social justice is our thing, what we do is social justice, it feels like I am raising a flag of this is who I am, and I'm declaring an identity as a scholar in my own right.

Responses to questions in this category were mixed. A few participants spoke to faculty members' feelings of inexperience with SL and others to the material support available to do the work. There was hope that participating in this focus group would yield some lessons on best practices and result in ideas for how social justice and intercultural-focused SL can be approached. We recognize that the pedagogy of TPC emphasizes critical thinking so that we can generate knowledge out of rhetorical actions. We remain hopeful that SL, while "an emergent pedagogy," can still help students engage in critical thinking (Turnley, 2007, p. 107).

Programmatic and Pedagogical Recommendations

Our rich focus group discussions provided space for instructors to imagine "programmatic and pedagogical recommendations for social justice/intercultural SL." This code offered us several insights for further improving SL projects, curricula, and programs with social justice and intercultural communication in mind. Here, participants attempted to grapple with the need and indeed desire to do this critical work weighted against the obstacles they had thus far encountered. Many participants saw in SL for social justice an issue of "problem versus capacity." To that end, participants suggested an expansion of reading lists in the curriculum that bring together learning outcomes and effects on community partners. That way, the activities designed within the SL project will be more consistent with expectations derived from that theoretical foundation. Moreover, learning outcomes that include the benefits of SL informed by social justice goals and intercultural communication theory and practice are critical. Indeed, one participant put it succinctly:

> If your outcomes are racist, your systems are racist. So asking what the outcomes are and evaluating. Are they racist? Will this have implications for that? What we're planning to do, how we're planning to do it, how we're communicating it. And then the other question is or this is more of a statement, but it's when the experience of dominant groups is the baseline, there is no equity. So whose experience are we factoring into our decisions? And what is the relationship with equity?

By the same token, if learning outcomes are neutral on issues of race and racial inequality, the course might be exhibiting the kind of ivory tower criticism that has been labeled against institutions of higher learning for failure to intersect with the communities within which they are constructed. Worse, it may reinforce systems of discrimination and alienation.

Participants also considered flexibility a necessary component for doing this work. With flexibility, instructors might not feel constrained to check off all the items on their planning list while making it difficult to address contingencies as they arise. Furthermore, there was a call for protecting junior faculty who do this work and promoting self-advocacy so that faculty can speak out rather than cower and act in deference to senior faculty as this dynamic has the potential to perpetuate injustice. When it comes to students, suggestions ranged from developing a kind of heuristic that would enable students to tease out their expertise, strengths and skills. The goal here is to enable students to take ownership of these skills so they can be motivated to go out and do the work and take responsibility "for their own learning." As one participant put it, "we have to understand that people are much more important than the objectives that we're trying to get across in our classes. I think shifting that mentality is difficult, especially if you have a lot of students" Indeed, one participant offered:

> One is by choosing community partners wisely. And this is a trial by fire I think in some ways of making some bad choices early on and being like, oh, I'm not going to do that again.
>
> I'm thinking a lot more about monetary ways that we can play the system in order to actually foster material change.

This participant makes clear the importance of connecting with community partners who are open to learning about the particulars of the course and are willing to work with the faculty member to create a healthy balance where students are neither exploited nor exploitative. In addition to striking a solid working relationship, this participant notes a need for thinking about monetary contributions that could be sought in order to offer something else tangible for community partners besides the SL work that students may produce.

Our focus group findings lead us to posit that small, yet specific improvements have the potential to make a positive difference in how SL programs are positioned. For example, identifying a clear theme or thrust for SL programming helps to cement purpose and provides more traction for faculty, students, and community partners to work, since, as Butin (2015) shared, SL programming is often not part of curriculum since few faculty understand how to get started (p. 8). As noted in our "Challenges" section, many practitioners can feel overwhelmed and burned out because of a lack of steadiness and support. They can also feel like there is a disconnect between the classroom and community experiences. Our findings underscore the importance of infusing values consistent with social justice and intercultural communication throughout SL programs and curricula to both respect and ensure meaningful experiences for both community partners and students. SL courses that make use of TPC programmatic values that foreground social justice, intercultural communication, and context as major elements of programming, for instance, stand to have the foundation to help make useful strides for both students and community partners.

Additionally, by organizing our findings using five themes—social justice use, activities, challenges, context, and recommendations—we extrapolate the significance of faculty relationships with community partners, noting that a socially just and interculturally balanced SL program requires strong community relationships as well as having space for faculty to discuss SL in TPC. For the former, as noted in our “recommendations” section, more than three participants talked about the need to liaise as best as possible with community partners so that their needs are understood and so that the faculty members have the chance to share their needs with students as well. This core understanding helps to build what can be a sustained relationship across semesters or quarters. With the latter, participants noted the need for spaces, like the focus group, to gain ideas and talk about their experiences. We gather that more research, workshops, and opportunities for faculty to talk about SL in TPC, especially as intersecting with ongoing conversations about social justice and intercultural communication in TPC, would be welcomed.

Zoom

Our zoom chats during the three focus group sessions were also sites that deserve attention in our discussion. We’ve chosen to include two chat interactions here as examples to highlight the power of making use of technology and discussion in real time. When asked “How did you begin or conceive of connecting service-learning projects in TPC with a slant toward social justice?” participants shared this using the chat feature:

> Participant 1: I like using principles of andragogy, which is adult learning theory, and PBL (problem-based learning), and spend time with students determining problems they want to solve. We then think about the best strategies to solve them, which includes projects and artifact development.
>
> Participant 2: 👏 choose community partners wisely!
>
> Participant 3: To me, that relationship makes the experience "real" and in a way, it's easier to ground the ethical, social, and the just when you have someone sitting across from you/in the same Zoom room.
>
> Participant 1: I like to develop "internship agreement forms," which are individualized amendments to the syllabus, a contract negotiated by client and student, which helps forefront potential miscommunication
>
> Participant 2: "the what" and "the who" 👏
>
> Participant 4: ^^Awesome!
>
> Participant 2: Exactly—the relational aspect of it is key!

This exchange was insightful in that participants explicitly brought together their pedagogical approaches to SL and social justice with concrete activities, practices, as well as concerns. These examples could be construed to be primary teaching methods, given that participants shared them unprompted and are based on their individual pedagogical experiences.

Additionally, when asked about how they engage SL and social justice, several participants offered these points in the Zoom chat:

> Participant 1: We have a large percentage of BIPOC students in our College of Engineering. Consequently, our classes have a good bit of diversity, though we are lower on international representation in more recent years (particularly in relation to COVID). We also have a university emphasis on Research that Reaches out, which aims to (eventually) place 95% of students in a service-learning opportunity related to their discipline, particularly in an international context by their senior year. While the university emphasizes international service learning and inter-cultural experiences, there are only a few opportunities for the same caliber of research-based or technical projects here in the local community.

> Participant 2: I think helping the students understand the context of the client (in contrast with their own personal context as a TPC student) helps up front to alert them to be sensitive to the nuances going in and avoid jumping to conclusions—even when they've done research on the client ahead of time.

> Participant 3: In my Community Engaged Learning certificate class, I had students utilize Assets Based Mapping to try to move them away from thinking through colonizing paradigms and deficit-based "needs."

A lot can be deduced from these impromptu chats. For one, a university that prioritizes international service creates conditions necessary for faculty to create programs and projects that bring students into these spaces, even if only metaphorically. Engaging students in these kinds of projects inevitably gets them to grapple with difference and intercultural issues in TPC, which might lead to close interactions with people who are different, including critical engagement with power structures by which they are circumscribed. Second, building in time for students to learn about the client promotes active learning, on a firsthand basis. Students not only gain knowledge but also understand the values and the vision of the client, which makes them better able to accurately represent and advocate on their behalf.

And finally, evoking the concept of "colonizing paradigms" is germane to the U.S. context within the discourse of critical pedagogy. Such a critical engagement with less "deficit-based" conceptions of community needs opens up the possibility to interrogate and resist power dominance and to develop a vocabulary of imagination in which the interests of service and justice can be served.

Conclusion and Implications

Our study demonstrates that faculty are grappling with questions of approaches, capacity, and expertise as they pertain to social justice in their classrooms. They are also at times operating under a cloud of political and ideological oversight that is opposed to mentions of (in)equality as patently un-American. In a climate such as this, we find ourselves as holders of disciplinary knowledge weighing between operating within a social justice framework that makes "social, institutional, and organizational change toward equity" (Haas and Eble, 2018, p. 4–5) and operating within highly politicized public climates in which we may be still figuring out how to best address systemic injustices perpetuated by TPC and not fall into the trap of its perceived neutrality. Ongoing issues of discriminatory practices and intercultural miscommunication demand that we critically engage and dismantle them in order to achieve some measure of social justice.

SL locates learning in spaces where students might exert institutional, personal, and social privilege. Acknowledging this possibility invites further analysis of what those spaces might look like long-term when more just structures are put in place. Indeed, helping students confront and grapple with privilege in the communities within which their learning occurs compels engagement with less structurally privileged communities, while presenting an uncomfortable but potentially necessary space that promotes critical analysis of systems of power. Further, questioning privilege can help students confront their broader obligations to the community and the unjust systems in which those communities subsist. Ultimately, SL and social justice is fraught with both vulnerability and complicity with power and privilege.

As well, TPC is about user-advocacy (Hart-Davidson, 2013; Jones, 2016) which renders its pedagogy a site of advocacy. As Jones (2016) argued, TPC scholars ought to "perceive their work as advocacy (broadly defined), promoting a more genuine and critical interrogation of how our work impacts the human experience (p. 309). On this score, we are fortunate that since its humanistic and social justice turns, TPC pedagogy has developed the language and tools to ensure that social justice is a core component of our curricula (see Agboka and Matveeva, 2018). Furthermore, as categories of TPC such as UX and design thinking have shown, instructors do not have to look too far to weave the strands of SL, social justice, and intercultural communication course content. As we engage in SL for social justice and as informed by intercultural communication, we can learn from community partners and their ways of knowing to shape technical discourse in caring and compassionate ways (Agboka 2014). SL is best positioned to "amplify the agency of the … under-resourced" communities with a view to supporting their ongoing efforts to restructure the material conditions that render them prime targets for SL opportunities in the first place.

With an intersection of social justice, intercultural communication, user-advocacy, and SL courses and programs, our research can inform TPC practices across teaching, learning, community, and departmental contexts. Not only did we prioritize a specific community of practice by choosing the focus group as a research method, but we also provided a space for practitioners to contend with the many ways that programs are doing well and also struggling to do the work of social justice and intercultural SL advocacy in their respective locations. With the more recent elimination of DEIA initiatives and other inclusive forms of engagement, TPC scholars, teachers, and practitioners could play a pivotal role in collaborating with the communities impacted by such directives to collectively develop a plan of action that is grounded in social justice and that centers university outreach for affecting material change at the same time that our students can gain deeper insights into how they can positively contribute to society.

This article focused on gaining insights into how social justice and intercultural approaches in TPC inform SL curricula and pedagogies in practice. In the course of our study, we recognized the need to highlight the importance of community representation within SL contexts. Our research pool was limited to TPC teachers and administrators, which limited our ability to interview either students who have been involved in such programming or the community members with whom such partnerships have been developed. Future research can examine this question of social justice and intercultural approaches to SL from the perspective of community partners and the students who engage with them. Finally, future research can further explore how intercultural communication pedagogies are designed and implemented in quasi-workplaces, and how these pedagogies equip students who have taken such courses to more easily navigate their future workplaces.

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Enhancing University Honors Students' Experience with Technical Communication and User Experience Projects

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Abstract Honors programs at colleges and universities often aim to provide undergraduate students with supplemental experiences that enhance their education across various majors. In 2023, our university introduced an "honors enhanced" (HE+) initiative, allowing honors students to earn course hour-equivalent honors credits toward graduation by completing additional components within designated courses. To explore the potential impact of this initiative on program design, we conducted a pedagogical case study of our Introduction to Technical Communication service course that was adapted for HE+ students by incorporating user experience (UX) projects as the learning enrichment component. Working closely with the instructor, we developed an HE+ plan, which was implemented and delivered to participating students. As part of this process, we documented the instructor's experience and captured insights into student learning. This article presents our findings, shares pedagogical strategies derived from the instructional experience and student responses, and discusses the implications of aligning high-level university initiatives with localized disciplinary priorities.

Keywords honors programs, honors students, user experience, design, collaboration, technical communication pedagogy, project-based learning, enriched curriculum

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Introduction: Honors Programming and TPC Pedagogy

Technical and professional communication (TPC) programs have long served as vital partners in undergraduate education, offering students practical skills and interdisciplinary experiences that extend beyond traditional classroom boundaries. Given their multifaceted and experiential nature, TPC programs are uniquely positioned to address contemporary challenges facing undergraduate honors education. TPC instructional content, learning outcomes, and programmatic efforts naturally align with honors education values through their inter- or cross-disciplinary and experiential nature. This alignment has made TPC programs desirable partners for developing and testing honors program initiatives, offering students enriched academic opportunities that foster intellectual growth, critical thinking, and real-world application.

However, universities increasingly contend with evolving student expectations, socio-political tensions, rapid technological shifts, and intensified competition––issues requiring broader strategies than experiential learning alone. These pressures intersect with the looming "enrollment cliff," compelling institutions to differentiate their curricular offerings while demonstrating the added value of honors education. For some institutions, enhanced honors programs serve as strategic responses to these challenges, offering flexible, competency-based pathways to academic distinction that appeal to students seeking meaningful and personalized educational experiences.

This study explores how TPC's integration with honors programming can address these challenges through a pedagogical case study. We examine the implementation of an "honors enhanced" (HE+) initiative at our university, where honors students earn course hour-equivalent honors credits by completing additional UX-focused components within our Introduction to Technical Communication service course. By documenting the instructor's experience and capturing insights into student learning, we contribute to the growing scholarship that bridges disciplinary and institutional priorities while demonstrating TPC's capacity for rigorous, honors-level inquiry and innovation.

Honors Programs in Contemporary Higher Education

Honors programs have evolved considerably from their traditional roots in liberal education to become incubators for innovative pedagogical practices that blend disciplinary depth with interdisciplinary breadth (Chaszar, 2017). Contemporary honors programs––from university-wide honors colleges to major-specific learning enrichment initiatives––operate across disciplines, offering curricular and co-curricular experiences that extend beyond standard undergraduate requirements (Scott, Smith, & Cognard-Black, 2017). The purpose of honors programs today extends beyond academic rigor to cultivate leadership, civic engagement, and lifelong learning commitment through supplemental learning experiences that encourage students to explore topics in greater depth, engage in original research, and contribute to their communities.

Experiential learning serves as a prominent cornerstone of effective honors pedagogy, as institutions recognize the need to equip students with skills extending beyond theoretical knowledge. These approaches emphasize real-world application, problem-solving, and collaboration through service-learning, study abroad programs, internships, and project-based coursework. Such experiential learning resonates strongly with honors education goals, providing opportunities for students to engage deeply with complex problems in interdisciplinary settings while preparing them for dynamic global challenges.

Strategic responses to contemporary higher education challenges have led many institutions to develop enhanced honors programs (Cox, 2018; Reynolds, Case, & Spritz, 2018). These initiatives address mounting pressure to attract and retain high-achieving students while accommodating diverse student needs and aspirations amid demographic shifts and fierce competition for top-performing students (Weisman, 2022; Blake, 2024; Gonçalves et al., 2024; Mallach, 2024). Enhanced honors programs often incorporate competency-based learning and alternative credentialing approaches, such as micro-credentials and badges (Ashcroft et al., 2021; Booth, Ponce, & Hodges, 2024), which recognize specific competencies and achievements within and beyond traditional curricula.

TPC and Experiential Learning in Honors Education

From the relatively scarce literature on honors teaching and learning in TPC-related topics, scholars have reported that students benefit from complementary assignments or educational activities that augment course content. These activities, including blogging, collaborative writing, and scientific journaling, encourage students to develop rhetorical awareness, build confidence in content creation, practice team processes, and instill reflective mindsets (Guzy, 2003, 2015; Ryan, Gould, & Tucker, 2012; Harlan-Haughey et al., 2016).

TPC's integration with honors programs builds naturally on the field's longstanding commitment to service and community engagement. From teaching students to create audience-centric technical genres to current focus on broad social justice challenges, TPC has consistently prioritized meeting users' and constituents' needs across various contexts. TPC scholar-instructors advocate community-based action research and engaged learning pedagogies, where students serve as active agents of change through course projects in their respective communities (Huckin, 1997; Matthews & Zimmerman, 1999; Sapp & Crabtree, 2002; Scott, 2004; Adler-Kassner, Crooks, & Watters, 2023; Jiang & Tham, 2025).

Service-learning in TPC courses particularly connects academic theory with practical outreach, as students produce technical documents, community resources, and content for nonprofits and local organizations. This pedagogy aligns with universities' broader missions to foster civic responsibility and social impact among students (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010; Watson et al., 2011). By contributing to real projects addressing community issues, service-learning highlights how TPC students can use communication expertise to enact social good, reinforcing the discipline's commitment to ethical and inclusive communication (Cleary & Flammia, 2012; Agboka & Matveeva, 2018).

UX Integration in TPC Curricula

TPC programs have increasingly adapted to changing workplace demands, including developments in digital technology and globalization of workplace activities (Johnson-Eilola, 1996; Hart-Davidson, 2001). Consequently, TPC curricula often combine theoretical instruction with practice-oriented experiences, offering dual emphasis on theory and practice. Over the past decade, growing TPC scholarship has underscored the importance of integrating design thinking, user experience (UX) methodologies, and applied project-based learning into TPC curricula (Rice-Bailey & Shalamova, 2016; De Hertogh & DeVasto, 2021; Rose & Turner, 2025).

Design thinking, popularized in engineering and business management, focuses on empathetic engagement with users, iterative prototyping, and collaborative problem-solving (Tham, 2021a). Its philosophy and methods align with TPC's concern for user-centered communication, as both fields prioritize clarity, accessibility, and contextual relevance. TPC instructors have adopted design thinking strategies through UX applications to enhance students' abilities to address complex communication challenges through iterative cycles of discovery, ideation, testing, and refinement (as shown in Tham, 2021b).

UX practices emphasize understanding users' goals, behaviors, and contexts, applying this knowledge to create effective interfaces, documents, and overall user experiences (Redish & Barnum, 2011; Hassenzahl, 2013). UX research methods, such as contextual inquiry, interviews, and usability testing, help students develop competencies needed to tailor communication artifacts to specific audiences. By incorporating these practices, TPC programs build on user-centered design traditions, ensuring students can conduct meaningful research into user needs and preferences (Zappen & Geisler, 2009).

Recent studies illustrate benefits of integrating UX projects into TPC classes. Jerrica Renita Donelson (2025) described how students working on design-centric UX research developed racial storytelling competency and anti-racist communication practices. Similarly, Kylie Jacobsen and Danielle DeVasto (2023) reported that students engaged in UX-based projects showcased improved critical thinking, team collaboration, and reflective practice skills. UX projects also offer students opportunities to practice functional design requirements, including accessibility (Lee & Oswal, 2024; Strantz, 2025), security (Banville, 2024), and usability (Breuch, Zachry, & Spinuzzi, 2001; Chong, 2017; Hocutt et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence suggests that TPC curricula incorporating UX projects often lead to heightened student engagement, deeper understanding of user advocacy, and improved learning outcomes (Tham, 2021b; Martin, 2022; Rea & Balghare, 2025). Honors programs, often seeking interdisciplinary and high-impact educational experiences, provide ideal settings for TPC courses to explore complex communication challenges with meaningful real-world outcomes.

Research Opportunity and Study Rationale

While experiential learning, service-learning, and project-based pedagogy are widely studied in TPC, the integration of honors-specific components––particularly those aligned with university priorities––presents a significant research opportunity. This emerging area offers rich potential to expand our understanding of how TPC/UX integration can enhance honors education experiences. The opportunity to investigate how honors-level projects can enrich TPC pedagogy, particularly through UX design and supplemental learning experiences, opens new pathways for disciplinary growth. By positioning TPC projects within honors curricula, both programs benefit: honors students gain marketable skills and exposure to user-focused research methodologies, while TPC programs demonstrate their value in tackling high-level interdisciplinary concerns.

This study offers implications for multiple stakeholder groups within higher education. For TPC instructors, our research reveals practical strategies for integrating honors-level enhancements without substantially increasing workload, while providing models for meaningful student engagement through real-world projects. TPC program administrators can leverage these insights to strengthen their programs' institutional positioning, demonstrating TPC's capacity for high-impact pedagogical innovation and its alignment with university-wide strategic initiatives. The study also provides evidence for how TPC programs can serve as effective partners in honors education, potentially expanding enrollment and enhancing program visibility.

More broadly, this research contributes to institutional understanding of how discipline-specific expertise can be strategically aligned with university-wide honors initiatives. Rather than implementing one-size-fits-all approaches, institutions can learn from this case study how to adapt honors programming to leverage the unique strengths of individual disciplines. The integration of UX methodologies within TPC honors coursework also demonstrates pathways for incorporating contemporary professional skills into traditional academic frameworks, addressing employer demands while maintaining academic rigor.

Our Context: HE+ Programming at Texas Tech University

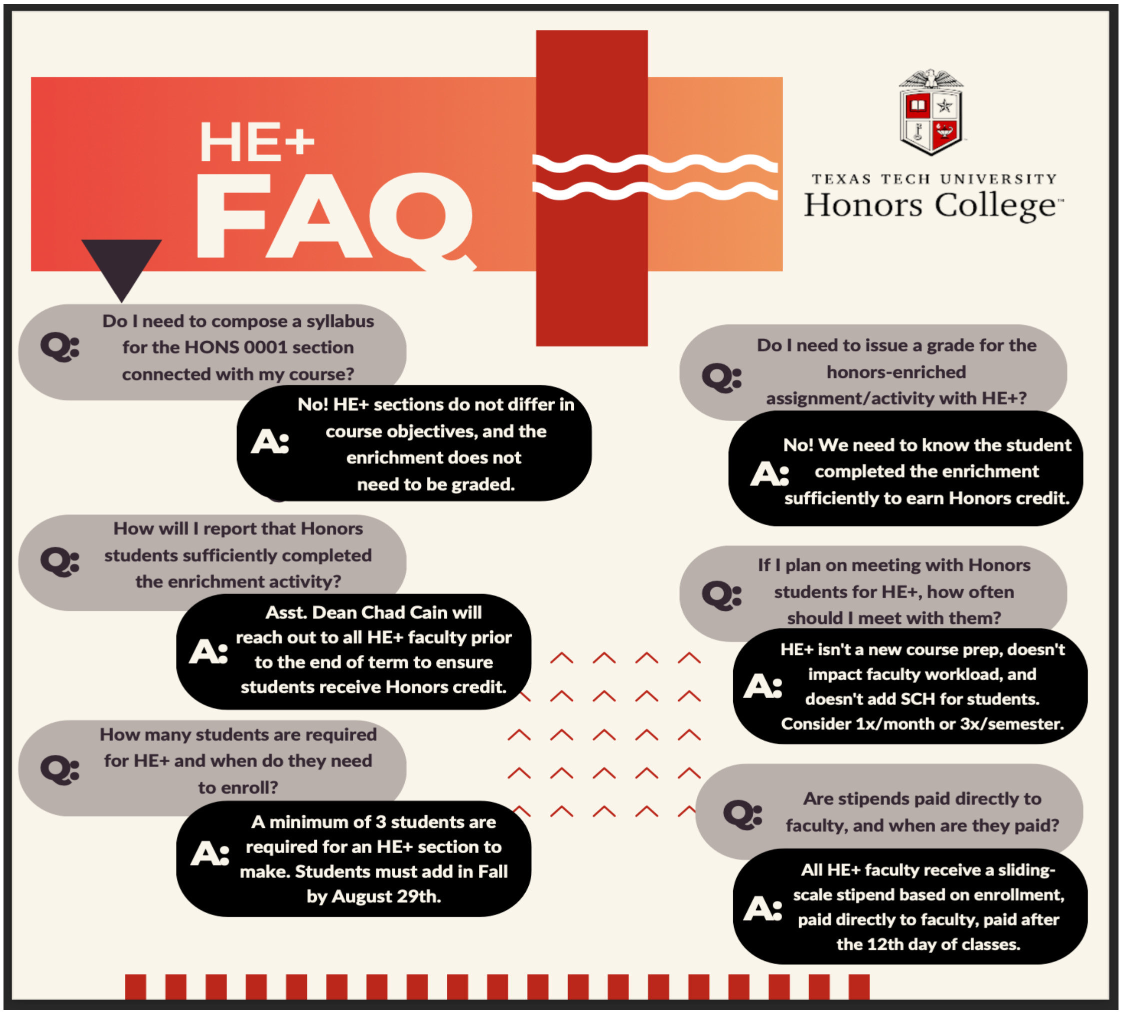
Although TPC programs remain a strong ally and viable partner for honors initiatives, universities are increasingly contending with evolving student expectations, socio-political tensions, rapid technological shifts, and intensified competition––issues that require broader strategies to address than experiential learning alone. Per popular and scholarly sources alike, higher education institutions are facing mounting pressure to attract and retain high-achieving students while addressing diverse student needs and aspirations (Weisman, 2022; Blake, 2024; Gonçalves et al., 2024; Mallach, 2024).

These pressures intersect with another looming challenge for higher education: the fear-inducing "enrollment cliff" (Wu, Chang, & Hu, 2021; Phillips & Jones, 2024). Demographic shifts point to a decline in traditional college-age populations over the coming decade. Many colleges, including those with established honors programs, anticipate reduced enrollment and a fiercer battle for top-performing students. This heightened competition compels administrators and educators to differentiate their curricular offerings and justify the added value of honors education. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a shift toward hybrid or fully online modalities (García-Morales, Garrido-Moreno, & Martín-Rojas, 2021; Neuwirth, Jović, & Mukherji, 2021). These innovations broaden access and flexibility but also complicate how experiential projects can be carried out. Of course, technological advances require rethinking pedagogy. Universities increasingly expect honors programs to demonstrate innovation and capture students' attention through blended learning formats and digital portfolios (Colombari, D'Amico, & Paolucci, 2021; Rose & Ponce, 2024). Altogether, these evolving conditions mean that TPC scholars have much to consider when designing or adapting honors-specific modules. Staying attuned to shifting student demographics, socio-political climates, technological innovation, and new learning modalities is proven to be critical. To continue to offer rigorous, relevant, and adaptable experiences for students with varied aspirations, these challenges need to be tackled systematically.

For some institutions, initiatives like enhanced honors programs serve as strategic responses to these challenges (Cox, 2018; Reynolds, Case, & Spritz, 2018). By offering flexible, competency-based pathways to academic distinction, these new, flexible programs appeal to students seeking meaningful and personalized educational experiences. They also align with broader trends in alternative credentialing, such as micro-credentials and badges (Ashcroft et al., 2021; Booth, Ponce, & Hodges, 2024), which recognize specific competencies and achievements within and beyond the traditional curriculum. These programs promise to not only support student retention and satisfaction but also contribute to the institutional mission by fostering innovation in teaching and learning.

We believe the case of the "honors enhanced" (HE+) initiative at our institution provides a compelling opportunity to study how such programs can be adapted to meet these goals. At our institution, a four-year Hispanic-serving university, administrators introduced the HE+ initiative in early 2023 to expand opportunities for honors students to engage in advanced, discipline-specific learning experiences. The program enables honors students to enroll in designated courses that include additional components beyond the standard curriculum, earning course hour-equivalent honors credits that count toward the 24-credit requirement for graduating with honors distinction. Figure 1 shows a faculty-facing poster containing high-level questions and answers provided by the honors college.

Figure 1. Faculty-facing FAQ poster (2023) from the Honors College. Textual content of the poster is transcribed in Appendix B.



The HE+ initiative emerged as part of a broader effort to modernize and enhance the university's honors program. Recognizing the need to provide flexible and scalable pathways to honors distinction, administrators designed the program to integrate seamlessly with existing curricula while maintaining the rigor and quality associated with honors education. Key goals of the initiative are twofold. First, the program supports the development of interdisciplinary competencies by encouraging faculty to design enhancements that draw on multiple fields of knowledge. Second, by incentivizing faculty to develop honors enhancements, the initiative stimulates the creation of novel pedagogical approaches that benefit both honors and non-honors students.

The HE+ program operates as an opt-in model within designated courses, where honors students complete supplemental assignments, projects, or research activities that align with the course's learning objectives. These enhancements are developed collaboratively by faculty and honors program administrators to ensure consistency and alignment with institutional goals. The flexibility of the model allows it to be adapted across disciplines, enabling students to engage in honors-level work within their chosen field of study.

For example, in the context of our ENGL 2311 Introduction to Technical Communication service course, the HE+ component was designed to include supplemental UX projects that extended the standard curriculum (more details are included in Appendix A and covered in the discussion section). As we will explain later, this approach not only provided honors students with advanced learning opportunities but also aligned with the course's emphasis on real-world applications and interdisciplinary collaboration. The HE+ initiative reflects and contributes to several key trends in higher education, including competency-based learning, alternative credentialing, and the growing emphasis on customization and flexibility in academic pathways.

Competency-based learning focuses on the acquisition and demonstration of specific skills and knowledge, allowing students to progress at their own pace. The HE+ program aligns with this model by emphasizing the development of advanced competencies within the context of existing courses. Through honors enhancements in a technical communication course, students may gain deeper insights and practical experience in UX practices such as user research, design analysis, and project communication. Mentioned earlier, as traditional academic credentials face increasing scrutiny, alternative forms of credentialing like micro-certifications have emerged as valuable tools for recognizing student achievements. The HE+ program integrates elements of alternative credentialing by awarding honors credits for specific enhancements, providing students with tangible evidence of their accomplishments. This approach may not only benefit students but also enhance the institution's ability to demonstrate the value of its honors program to external stakeholders.

The HE+ initiative represents a considerably innovative approach in honors education, yet its implementation raises important questions about how such programs can be effectively designed, delivered, and assessed within specific disciplinary contexts. So, this study seeks to explore the impact of the HE+ program on student learning and engagement, focusing on its application within our ENGL 2311 course. By situating this case study within the broader context of TPC pedagogy, we aim to contribute to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to bridge disciplinary and institutional priorities, ultimately enriching the educational experiences of all students.

We are further motivated by the potential to shape the future of TPC programming. By encouraging greater participation of inspired students, this research sheds light onto TPC's capacity for rigorous, honors-level inquiry and innovation. It promotes TPC programs as a critical asset for addressing real-world challenges through applied learning. Additionally, the study provides insights into how university-wide priorities, such as honors initiatives, can be effectively integrated into TPC curricula. Finally, it carves out a space for new pedagogical research agendas, offering strategies to enhance TPC's relevance and impact within higher education. In the following sections, we establish our research questions and the methodological framework guiding this study.

Research Questions

As revealed in our literature synthesis, TPC has seen limited exploration of honors-level initiatives within its programmatic design. While experiential learning, service-learning, and project-based pedagogy are widely studied in TPC, the integration of honors-specific components, particularly those aligned with university priorities remains underexplored. Additionally, although recent scholarship demonstrates the benefits of integrating UX projects into TPC classes––including improved student engagement, deeper understanding of user advocacy, and enhanced learning outcomes (Tham, 2021b; Martin, 2022; Rea & Balghare, 2025)––these studies have not examined UX integration specifically within honors contexts or as part of institution-wide honors initiatives.

This gap provides a valuable opportunity to investigate how honors-level projects can enrich TPC pedagogy, particularly by incorporating elements such as UX design and supplemental learning experiences. Given the documented positive effects of UX integration in TPC courses and the need to understand how such approaches function within honors programming, our initial research direction focuses on the practical outcomes of this pedagogical approach. Simultaneously, the broader challenge facing TPC programs––demonstrating their capacity for rigorous, honors-level inquiry while aligning with institutional strategic initiatives––necessitates investigation into scalable implementation strategies. To that end, this study articulates two core research questions derived from these literature-identified needs:

RQ 1: How does the HE+ initiative affect student engagement and learning outcomes in an introductory TPC course?

RQ2: What strategies are viable for integrating honors-level enhancements in TPC pedagogy?

By addressing these questions, our study aims to inform future curriculum design by evaluating the HE+ initiative's potential as a scalable model for honors engagement across institutional sizes and contexts and by identifying adaptable practices for aligning institutional strategies with TPC programming and pedagogy.

Methods

To explore the impact of the HE+ initiative within an introductory TPC course, this IRB-approved study employed two primary research methods: 1) instructor reflections and 2) student surveys. These methods are selected for their complementary ability to provide rich, contextual insights into both the instructional and student experiences of the honors-enhanced coursework.

Instructor reflections provide a first-hand account of instructional decision-making, challenges, and successes (Kraft, 2002; Mallette, 2024). In this study, the instructor's reflections offer critical insights into the design and implementation of HE+ components, particularly the integration of UX projects. These reflections capture the process of ideating the coursework, the nuanced dynamics of classroom interaction, adjustments to teaching strategies, and the perceived effectiveness of the honors enhancement in a TPC course. Reflective practice is inherently iterative, allowing educators to document their evolving understanding and contributing to both the rigor and relevance of the study. In generating the instructor's reflections, the lead author of this research report met with the instructor to discuss reflection and writing tips.

Surveys are a well-established method of collecting data on students' experiences, perceptions, and outcomes (Plumb & Spyridakis, 1992; Scott, 1995; Barker & Stowers, 2007). In this study, survey questionnaires were administered three times––i.e., December 2023, April/May 2024, and December 2024. Five questions were asked in each survey:

1. We started the semester with articles about user experience (UX). Were those articles helpful in our discussion of UX as we moved from our discussion of usability in module 2 and began working on module 3?
2. Did meeting with the leadership team of your student org help you with the process of creating the documents?
3. Was your group receptive to the advance work you had done with your student org?
4. Were you able to share the deliverables with the org after module 3 wrapped up? What was the reaction of the leadership team to your deliverables?

5. Did you feel that your HE+ experience this semester was beneficial? Why or why not?

The survey to HE+ students aimed to capture their engagement, learning experiences, and perspectives on the honors-enhanced components. The open-ended survey questions above were designed to encourage students to articulate their experiences in their own words, supporting a rich qualitative dataset.

In terms of data analysis, the instructor reflections were analyzed through an inductive qualitative approach (Tracy, 2024), allowing themes to emerge organically from the narrative data (Blyler, 1996). Similarly, student survey responses are analyzed thematically to identify patterns in student engagement, learning outcomes, and the perceived value of HE+ components. To ensure validity, both data sources are triangulated to corroborate findings, providing a multi-perspective view of the HE+ initiative. Reliability is supported by transparent documentation of the analysis process and systematic treatment of qualitative data (Conklin & Hayhoe, 2010; Saldaña, 2014). Sentiment analysis and sentiment scores (Lei & Liu, 2021) were included in the survey analysis to quantify students' emotional and evaluative responses, offering a structured way to interpret open-ended feedback. By including polarity (positivity or negativity) and subjectivity (level of opinion versus fact), we could capture trends in participant sentiment across different aspects of the program. This approach strengthens our qualitative insights (e.g., McGuire & Kampf, 2015; Boettger & Ishizaki, 2018), providing a clearer picture of the program's perceived effectiveness and areas for improvement. These analytic methods, together, aimed to achieve a robust and reflective exploration of the HE+ initiative's impact on TPC pedagogy.

Results

We organized this results section into two main parts: the instructor's reflections and the student survey findings. We begin by reporting the instructor's reflections because it contains useful background information about the conception of the UX enrichment in the TPC introductory courses, as well as the instructor's own pedagogical intentions that may be used to understand the students' feedback gathered from the survey.

Sophie's Reflections: An Instructional Vignette

We asked the instructor, Sophie (pseudonym), who taught HE+ students in the introductory technical communication course to provide a first-person account of her experience in approaching the class. Her narrative, which was edited for length here, first reveals the collaborative process of developing honors enhancements and the practical considerations involved in curriculum adaptation:

> I began my journey with the HE+ course in April 2023, when K.G., the course coordinator for English 2311 sections, emailed me to ask if I would be interested in having one of my Fall 2311 sections designated as an HE+ section. I was told that they piloted the sections in the spring 2023 term. After I agreed, S.H., then the Director of the BA in Technical Communication, encouraged me to be creative with how I approached the activities of my HE+ section. S.H. also mentioned that this might be a good project to work with J.T and R.G. (technical communication faculty members) and the UX lab in the English department, and I scheduled a meeting to discuss possibilities.

Sophie's account illustrates how the HE+ initiative leveraged existing departmental relationships and resources rather than requiring entirely new infrastructure. Her approach demonstrates the importance of connecting honors enhancements to established course objectives:

> Our conversation during that meeting turned to issues of determining user needs and persona construction, and I slowly began to realize that there were strong ties from this concept to the third major assignment that I use in my 2311 course, where students assess the public facing communication of a student organization on our campus and create materials using free and readily available materials to communicate more effectively with the populations that they serve. Students are free to choose any student organization they want; some choose an org they are a part of, and some choose an org where they know members of the leadership team.

This connection to real campus organizations represents a key pedagogical choice that grounds UX learning in authentic contexts. However, Sophie's experience also reveals challenges in finding appropriate scholarly materials for this interdisciplinary approach:

> My original thought was to choose readings that approached the issue of usability from a student affairs lens. I thought that the students might find it interesting to explore the role that student organizations play in contributing to their college experience, but I wasn't able to find what I was looking for. I ultimately chose the materials that discussed issues of user experience design, information architecture, and persona development.

The curricular adaptation Sophie describes reflects broader questions about resource availability at the intersection of TPC, UX, and honors education. It exemplifies how honors enhancements can provide differentiated learning experiences within existing course structures. Sophie's approach concludes with a feedback loop that extends learning beyond traditional classroom boundaries:

> The semester begins with UX design readings and videos, followed by individual or group meetings to clarify the assignment and discuss approaches for engaging with student organizations. Students then meet with their chosen organization's leadership team to identify communication challenges and potential solutions. While regular 2311 students choose from eight possible deliverables, HE+ students can propose alternative options. For example, one Fall 2024 group created an onboarding pamphlet for the Student Government Association.
>
> After completing their deliverables alongside the regular class, HE+ students present their work to their partner organizations for feedback. The project concludes with a brief survey reflecting on their experience and the organization's response to their deliverables.

As we will deliberate further in the discussion section, Sophie's narrative captured an important benefit of augmenting the introductory course with a practical UX project. Providing students the chance to work directly with student organizations was an attempt to allow students to deepen their understanding of UX design and communication management. By interacting with organization leaders, identifying real challenges, and creating practical solutions, students were given the opportunity to extend their learning experience beyond the classroom. Next, we turn to the student survey results to uncover a different layer of observation about the HE+ implementation.

Student Survey Responses

A total of 35 student respondents across three sections of ENGL 2311 Introduction to Technical Communication completed the survey: 10 respondents in December 2023 (total student enrollment, N=12), 15 respondents in April/May 2024 (N=16), and 10 respondents in December 2024 (N=11). These survey responses offer detailed insights into students' HE+ experiences in their respective ENGL 2311 courses. The feedback highlights the program's strengths, particularly its ability to foster real-world skill application and collaborative engagement, while also identifying areas for potential refinement. Here, we highlight five key themes along with a sample of representative responses for context. Under each theme, we included sentiment scores (polarity and subjectivity) for comparison.

Helpfulness of learning materials

Students began the semester by engaging with articles on UX, which set the foundation for transitioning from usability concepts in Module 2 to the applied work in Module 3. Most students found these readings helpful, though their usefulness varied based on individual perspectives. For example, one respondent described the articles as "very helpful," elaborating that "they provided a strong foundation for the concepts we explored later in the semester and helped frame our discussions effectively." Another student shared a more moderate view, stating, "The articles were somewhat helpful; they gave me a good sense of UX principles, but I wish there had been more real-world examples to connect theory to practice."

The articles appeared to serve as a bridge for conceptual understanding, but some students indicated a desire for greater practical application. One student noted, "I felt the articles were useful for getting us to think critically about UX, but I would have liked to see more examples from industries or case studies." This suggests that while the readings were a valuable starting point, integrating more applied content could enhance their impact on students' learning. Sentiment scores for helpfulness of learning materials are:

- Mean polarity: 0.063 (slightly positive)
- Mean subjectivity: 0.094 (low subjectivity, indicating factual responses)

Engagement with organizational learning teams

Interacting with student organization leadership teams was a critical aspect of the program, offering students the opportunity to tailor their deliverables to the needs of their partners. Many students highlighted the importance of this engagement, which allowed them to ground their work in real-world requirements. One respondent shared, "Definitely, it was very helpful to have the background and expectations from the leadership team. It made our deliverables more targeted and relevant." Another student noted, "Meeting with the leadership helped us understand their goals and identify gaps we could address."

However, some students encountered challenges in coordinating with leadership. For instance, one respondent observed, "It probably would have been helpful if they were more available to meet with us earlier in the process." This feedback underscores the importance of timely and consistent communication with stakeholders. Despite these challenges, the opportunity to collaborate with leadership was widely appreciated, as it provided valuable insights that enhanced the quality of students' deliverables. Sentiment scores for engagement with organizational leadership teams are:

- Mean polarity: 0.208 (positive sentiment)
- Mean subjectivity: 0.392 (moderately subjective, reflecting personal opinions)

Group dynamics and receptiveness to pre-work

Group collaboration was another focal point of the survey, with students generally reporting positive experiences regarding their peers' receptiveness to pre-work completed with their student organizations. A student remarked, "Our group was very receptive to the work we had done. It helped us complete our portion efficiently and ensured everyone was on the same page." Another shared, "Yes, they especially liked the website concepts we proposed, and it helped spark productive discussions."

However, not all group dynamics were seamless. Some students mentioned variability in engagement levels among group members. One respondent explained, "Some group members were open-minded, but others didn't seem as interested in exploring new ideas." These differences in participation highlight the challenges of group work and the importance of fostering collaborative environments where all members feel motivated to contribute.

Despite occasional issues, the pre-work done with student organizations appeared to play a crucial role in aligning group efforts and ensuring deliverables were informed by stakeholder needs. The ability to connect preparatory efforts with final outputs was a recurring theme in the feedback, emphasizing the value of this structured approach. Sentiment scores for group dynamics and receptiveness of pre-work are:

- Mean polarity: 0.230 (positive sentiment)
- Mean subjectivity: 0.400 (moderately subjective)

Sharing deliverables with respective organizations

The process of sharing deliverables with student organizations was a significant milestone for students, allowing them to present the culmination of their efforts. Most respondents reported successfully sharing their work, with positive reactions from the leadership teams. One student described this experience: "Yes, we were able to share the deliverables with the leadership team, and they appreciated our work, especially the actionable insights we provided." Another highlighted a similar experience, noting, "We emailed the presentation and got good feedback, but I wish we had more direct interaction with them during the final stages."

While the majority of students experienced positive outcomes, some encountered logistical challenges in delivering their work. For example, one respondent mentioned, "I ended up just having to email the presentation because scheduling a follow-up meeting with the leadership team wasn't possible." This suggests that while students were able to complete the program's deliverables, additional support in coordinating these final steps might further enhance their experience. Sentiment scores for sharing deliverables are:

- Mean polarity: 0.297 (positive sentiment, the highest among all questions)
- Mean subjectivity: 0.536 (moderately high subjectivity, reflecting personal experiences and opinions)

Overall perceived impact of HE+

When reflecting on their overall experience, most students expressed that the program was beneficial. They valued the opportunity to apply UX principles in a real-world context and develop skills relevant to their career aspirations. One respondent summarized their experience by stating, "Yes, I think I learned a lot in my HE+ experience. It gave me a clearer understanding of how UX fits into real-world projects, and I feel more confident about applying these concepts in my future work." Another student echoed this sentiment, noting, "UX is such an important part of the career field I'm pursuing, so this experience was highly relevant and gave me practical experience that I wouldn't have gotten otherwise."

Students also appreciated the program's emphasis on collaboration and stakeholder engagement. One respondent explained, "This experience taught me how to communicate effectively with clients and how to adapt my work based on feedback." Another highlighted the program's practical nature, stating, "It was a good balance of theoretical learning and hands-on application, which is rare in most academic programs."

Despite these strengths, a few students expressed reservations about the program's added value. One respondent commented, "I can't say it really felt more beneficial than other group projects I've done, but it was still a good learning experience." Another noted, "While I learned a lot, I think the program could have been improved by providing more structured feedback on our deliverables." Sentiment scores for overall experience are:

- Mean polarity: 0.235 (positive sentiment)
- Mean subjectivity: 0.419 (moderate subjectivity)

Together, the survey responses generally skew positive across all questions, with the highest levels of positivity observed for "Sharing Deliverables" and "Overall Experience." Additionally, the moderately subjective nature of the responses indicates a balanced mix of personal opinions and factual reporting, providing a well-rounded perspective on students' experiences.

The feedback also points to several opportunities for enhancing the program. First, students suggested incorporating more practical examples and case studies into the initial UX readings to better connect theory to application. Second, ensuring timely and consistent communication with student organization leadership could address challenges related to stakeholder engagement. Third, fostering stronger group dynamics through team-building activities or clearer expectations might improve collaboration and participation. Finally, providing structured feedback on deliverables and facilitating more interactive sharing sessions with organizations could deepen students' learning and strengthen the program's impact.

Overall, the survey responses painted a positive picture of the semester-long program, highlighting its strengths in fostering real-world skill application, collaborative engagement, and stakeholder-focused deliverables. Students appreciated the opportunity to explore UX principles, work with student organizations, and develop practical solutions that addressed real-world needs. While the program was widely viewed as beneficial, the feedback also underscores areas for improvement, such as enhancing practical learning opportunities, refining group dynamics, and strengthening communication with stakeholders. By addressing these areas, the program can further enhance its impact and provide an even more valuable experience for future students.

Discussion of Findings

Our analysis highlights the impact of incorporating UX methodologies into TPC courses. Based on the instructor's experience and student responses after experiencing the course, we examined the challenges and opportunities that arise when implementing such an approach to satisfy honors enhancement in TPC pedagogy. This section delves into the specific effects of HE+ and UX projects on student engagement and learning outcomes, as well as strategies for integrating honors enhancements in TPC pedagogy.

Effects of HE+ & UX Projects on Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes

Overall, the integration of UX projects into the HE+ TPC course had resulted in positive impact on student engagement and learning outcomes. By working directly with student organizations, students were able to bridge theoretical UX concepts with real-world application. Survey responses highlighted that students found the experience valuable in deepening their understanding of UX principles, with many expressing an increased confidence in applying these concepts in professional settings. The opportunity to engage in stakeholder collaboration and iterative design thinking allowed students to develop practical communication and problem-solving skills, making the course a more immersive learning experience.

One of the key advantages of incorporating UX projects into the HE+ course was the ability to provide students with tangible applications of their developing knowledge in UX. Rather than just engaging in conceptual materials, students were able to identify usability challenges within student organizations, collaborate with leadership teams, and create deliverables that had a meaningful impact. This direct engagement enhanced student motivation and investment in the course material, contributing to higher levels of engagement in the coursework.

Students' overall perception

As found in the survey, student feedback regarding the HE+ component was generally positive, with many students appreciating the hands-on experience and application of UX principles. The sentiment scores indicated an overall positive reception, with students particularly valuing the opportunity to interact with stakeholders and apply their UX knowledge in meaningful ways. The ability to work in groups and contribute to a common goal also fostered collaboration and accountability. However, some students expressed a desire for greater structure in the form of additional case studies or more practical examples early in the semester to provide a stronger foundation for their projects. Despite the positive reception, students did highlight areas for improvement. Some noted that the usability readings, while useful, could be supplemented with more industry studies to better connect theoretical concepts to workplace practice. Additionally, while most students found their collaboration with student organization leadership beneficial, some encountered challenges in scheduling meetings and obtaining timely feedback. Addressing these logistical issues could further enhance student experiences in future iterations of the program.

Impact on course focus

The inclusion of UX projects in the HE+ course positively influenced learning outcomes. The project-based approach helped students develop key competencies in user research, stakeholder communication, and iterative design. Additionally, students reported an increased awareness of how UX principles can be applied beyond industry settings, such as in student organizations and higher education environments. Beyond technical skills, the HE+ activities also fostered important professional competencies, such as teamwork, project communication, and problem-solving. By working collaboratively with their peers and external stakeholders, students had the opportunity to navigate UX constraints and challenges.

Project impact

The UX project requirements played a crucial role in shaping the student experience. Having students engage with student organizations and tailor their deliverables to specific stakeholder needs helped create a more applied learning experience. Students appreciated the structured progression of the project, which allowed them to gradually build their skills before executing their final deliverables. However, as mentioned before, some students found the coordination with leadership teams to be challenging, particularly in cases where responses were delayed or inconsistent. Establishing more structured communication channels between students and organizational stakeholders may help mitigate these issues in the future. Additionally, students noted that while the project was valuable, clearer expectations and more structured feedback on deliverables could further enhance their learning outcomes.

Other opportunities and challenges

The most commonly cited benefits of the UX component in the course included the ability to apply design principles in a meaningful context, the hands-on nature of the project, and the relevance of the course. However, there were also some reported challenges. Group dynamics varied, with some students reporting that certain group members were less engaged than others. Some students also felt that the project could benefit from more structured feedback throughout the semester to ensure they were on the right track.

Instructor's experience

From an instructional perspective, the HE+ UX project provided a valuable opportunity to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. Sophie's reflections highlighted how the project evolved over time and the ways in which it encouraged students to engage critically with UX principles. By allowing students to work on real design problems, the course provided an enriched learning experience that extended beyond traditional classroom instruction. However, Sophie also noted the pedagogical challenges associated with finding appropriate reading materials and ensuring that students had sufficient foundational knowledge before beginning their projects. The lack of readily available research at the intersection of UX and higher education presented a limitation in curating course materials. Additionally, coordinating with student organizations required careful planning to ensure a smooth process for students. Future iterations of the program could benefit from more structured support in these areas, including the development of a curated repository of UX case studies relevant to higher education contexts.

Strategies for Integrating Honors Enhancements in TPC Pedagogy

Based on our analysis, we posit that the integration of honors enhancements HE+ in TPC pedagogy offers a pathway to enrich student learning through experiential activities. By embedding UX-focused and project-based learning elements, educators can foster deeper engagement and skill development. The success of such initiatives depends on intentional curriculum design, faculty commitment, and institutional support, as we discuss here.

Course design considerations

Designing honors-enhanced components requires a strategic approach that differentiates HE+ coursework from standard TPC courses while maintaining alignment with desirable course objectives. One effective strategy is to incorporate additional readings and research components that provide honors students with a deeper theoretical foundation in the subject matter (e.g., UX). The instructor's experience in the HE+ sections of ENGL 2311 demonstrates the value of integrating specialized UX readings and structured opportunities for stakeholder engagement. Providing students with access to curated materials and workshops can further enhance the depth of their learning. In addition to expanded reading materials, honors-enhanced components can involve more extensive research and reflective practice. For instance, students could be required to conduct usability studies, evaluate existing communication strategies, and propose data-driven solutions. Encouraging students to present their findings at academic conferences or publish in student research journals could further distinguish the HE+ experience and provide valuable professional development opportunities.

Incorporating UX approaches

A core component of the HE+ initiative was the use of project-based learning, particularly through UX-driven projects that involved problem-solving. By requiring students to interact with student organizations, assess communication challenges, and develop tailored solutions, the course aligned with best practices in honors pedagogy, which emphasize active learning, research engagement, and collaboration with external stakeholders. Future implementations can enhance this model by incorporating industry mentorship, UX labs, and iterative feedback loops to further refine students' deliverables. In addition, UX-driven projects would benefit from an iterative approach, where students engage in multiple rounds of stakeholder feedback and revision. Incorporating structured reflection activities––such as usability testing reports and peer critiques––can help students refine their critical thinking skills. Encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration with students from business, design, or computer science can also enhance the richness of the learning experience.

Scaling and sustainability considerations

Ensuring the scalability and sustainability of HE+ enhancements is critical for long-term success. While small-scale pilots can provide valuable insights, institutionalizing honors enhancements requires thoughtful planning. One strategy for scalability is to develop modular components that can be adapted across multiple TPC courses. For example, structured UX-based assignments can be embedded in multiple course sections with flexibility in the level of complexity for honors students. Additionally, creating a repository of successful projects and best practices can support faculty in implementing HE+ enhancements without requiring extensive new curriculum development.

Sustainability also depends on faculty buy-in and workload considerations, particularly given the reality that faculty are often overworked and overscheduled. Our institutional experience suggests that traditional professional development workshops may indeed create additional burden rather than support. Instead, our approach emphasized low-touch, integrated support mechanisms that worked within existing faculty workflows. The Honors College's explicit commitment that "HE+ isn't a new course prep, doesn't impact faculty workload" (see Figure 1 and Appendix B4) proved crucial for faculty participation. Rather than requiring extensive training, the program relied on faculty autonomy––as the Dean noted (Appendix B1), "You are the arbiter of what counts as an Honors enrichment in your field"––combined with readily available consultation when needed.

Institutional and programmatic support

University programs cannot be divorced from their institutional programming infrastructure. Thus, institutional backing plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of HE+ enhancements. Support from deans, department chairs, and program directors can help secure necessary resources, such as funding for UX tools, guest speakers, and project-based learning activities. Establishing formal partnerships with student organizations, campus UX labs, and external industry partners can also provide additional support structures. In addition to financial and logistical support, institutional recognition of faculty efforts is essential. Recognizing faculty contributions in honors course development through incentives such as research grants, course releases, or professional recognition can encourage participation. Establishing an honors teaching fellowship program or structured faculty mentorship for HE+ courses could further incentivize engagement. Aligning HE+ initiatives with broader institutional goals––such as experiential learning, workforce readiness, and interdisciplinary collaboration––can strengthen support and ensure the long-term sustainability of honors-enhanced pedagogy in TPC programs.

In addressing sustainability challenges during an era of fiscal austerity, our institution's approach offers practical insights for resource-constrained environments. Rather than requiring substantial new funding, the HE+ initiative leveraged existing institutional infrastructure through strategic cost-sharing and creative resource allocation. The Honors College provided modest stipends ($3,000 split between co-instructors) funded through existing honors program budgets rather than requiring new appropriations. This approach made faculty participation financially feasible without requiring department-level funding commitments.

Conclusion: Key Implications for TPC Programs

This study contributes to the broader discourse in TPC by addressing gaps in the literature pertaining to TPC pedagogy in relation to honors programming. While much has been written about experiential learning, service-learning, and project-based learning in TPC, relatively little attention has been given to the role of honors education in shaping these practices. By documenting the elements and outcomes of the HE+ initiative, this study provides insights into how TPC can support and expand honors education, offering a pathway forward for similar institutions and programs. By highlighting the benefits and challenges of integrating honors enhancements into TPC courses, this research offers recommendations for educators and administrators seeking to advance experiential learning and interdisciplinary collaboration. Moreover, it underscores the importance of aligning high-level institutional initiatives with the unique strengths and needs of individual disciplines, paving the way for more inclusive and innovative approaches to honors education.

The findings of this study further reinforce the importance of aligning broad university initiatives, such as the HE+ program, with the specific needs and pedagogical objectives of disciplinary programs like TPC. While honors programs aim to enrich undergraduate education holistically, their successful implementation within specialized disciplines requires thoughtful integration that respects both the goals of the broader initiative and the instructional imperatives of the field. Our study demonstrates that adapting a TPC service course for HE+ students through UX-focused projects not only provided enriched learning experiences but also reinforced key disciplinary competencies in audience analysis, usability, and design.

A growing emphasis on high-impact practices and experiential learning across universities has created opportunities for TPC courses to integrate into honors curricula in meaningful ways. As an applied field, TPC is uniquely positioned to respond to calls for innovation in teaching and learning through UX-based projects that challenge students to engage in real-world problem-solving. Our pedagogical case study highlights the potential of leveraging university-wide initiatives to enhance student engagement, deepen experiential learning, and reinforce professional skill development. However, these benefits are most effectively realized when pedagogical adaptations are developed in collaboration with faculty who understand the discipline's core learning objectives. Without such alignment, well-intended university programs risk introducing curricular modifications that may not fully serve the intellectual and professional goals of students in specialized fields.

This research also suggests broader implications for TPC pedagogy. First, it illustrates the value of incorporating UX methodologies as an honors-level enrichment strategy, positioning students to engage in more complex problem-solving and applied research. Second, it signals the need for greater institutional support in helping faculty translate high-level university initiatives into meaningful, discipline-specific learning experiences. Such support might include structured faculty development programs, opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration, and clear institutional guidance on integrating honors components without overburdening instructors or students.

Finally, this study reinforces the broader argument that university-driven academic enrichment efforts should not be imposed in a one-size-fits-all manner but should instead be adaptable to the needs of individual disciplines. By fostering a reciprocal relationship between institutional priorities and disciplinary expertise, universities can create honors experiences that not only serve their overarching missions but also meaningfully enhance technical and professional communication education. Ultimately, the HE+ initiative, as implemented in our study, demonstrates that when faculty agency, disciplinary expertise, and institutional innovation align, honors education can become a powerful mechanism for expanding experiential learning and advancing the goals of TPC programs.

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Appendix A

This appendix contains a sample sequence of communications (from Fall 2023) and materials given to HE+ students during this course. During the start of the semester, the instructor wrote an introductory email (A1) to HE+ students giving them an overview of the enhancement project they will be assigned in the course. During Week 4 or 5, the instructor then provided detailed assignment descriptions about the HE+ project (A2), with examples and evaluation criteria (A3). An email was also sent around this time with a calendar snapshot (A4) emphasizing the important dates pertaining to HE+ students. Next, the instructor reminded HE+ students about their interview exercise (A5), highlighting a few items of importance. Finally, the instructor reminded HE+ students about the post-project meetings with their respective organizations (A6).

A1. Introductory Communication with Students

Dear students, I am excited to begin this semester and I wanted to check in with you to give you an idea of what to expect.

We will be focusing on User Experience (UX) this semester. UX design (https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/ux-design) considers the elements that shape a user's experience with a product or service, how these elements make the user feel, and how easy it is to accomplish their desired tasks. We will discuss UX in a minimal way in our section of 2311, but this experience will give you a more in depth look at the type of research that is relevant in most disciplines. The work that we do as a part of our HE+ section will connect directly to the work we do in class when we get to our group project in module 3. We will begin by reading some scholarly articles about UX, particularly conducting a needs analysis, persona building, and prototype solutions.

Module 3 is a group project where you will choose the group members you want to work with, and then you will choose a student organization (no Panhellenic orgs), explore their online presences, and create deliverables that the organization can use to effectively connect with members, prospective members, and the campus community. I will ask you to identify a campus group early, and conduct interviews with members of the org first to assess their needs and later to assess their response to the deliverables your group created.

The readings and videos to get started are on our course Blackboard page, and I will be checking in with you again next week.

A2. Assignment Instructions

Dear students,

Attached you will find the assignment description for module 3. Each group will write a recommendation report discussing your findings and recommendations, and you will choose two of the following things to create for your group:

I. Create a one-page promotional flyer for the organization

II. Create an infographic that the organization could use to educate the public about an issue important to the organization

III. A social media campaign with at least five posts, appropriate hashtags, and maintenance instructions so that the members of the organization can keep the posts going

IV. A 5-10 question survey to help the organization learn more about their audience's communication preferences (Note: your survey should ONLY focus on communication issues.)

V. A redesigned website using Wix or WordPress or a similar site

VI. A mockup for a mobile app

VII. A 250-word TechAnnounce post to help your org connect with their audience

VIII. A scripted podcast

As you begin to decide what you choose to create for your deliverables, please remember that we are focusing our design on helping the org better communicate their mission, purpose, and activities to their campus communities. We are not creating events for your org, however if your org is planning an event, you could create materials for it. Similarly, we are not fundraising or recruiting, however if your organization is already planning a fundraiser and would like a deliverable designed for this, that would be acceptable. I understand that this seems like a narrow distinction, and I am happy to talk through any ambiguities.

I have met with several of you and have really enjoyed hearing about your plans and the orgs that you want to work with. There are some of you who have yet to schedule a chat about your plans. I have office hours in 207 Humanities (formerly English and Philosophy), on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 11:00-12:20, and I am available via Zoom Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays by appointment. This is an informal chat to answer questions and give updates; it won't take long.

A3. Specific Assignment Descriptions (Module 3)

Working as a Team to Solve a Complex Communication Problem

Working successfully in teams to solve problems is an essential workplace skill. First you will form groups of 4-5, and then you will choose a student organization at Texas Tech, excluding fraternities and sororities, from this website: https://ttu.campuslabs.com/engage/organizations. You may choose a student organization that you are a member of, although this is not a requirement. Some groups choose a student org that doesn't have a well-developed website or social media presence.

Your task is to thoroughly explore the websites and the social media accounts, paying careful attention to the mission of the student organization, and to analyze the Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results (SOAR analysis). You will present your findings and recommendations to the rest of the class.

The purpose of our work is to help the organization to better communicate their values and activities with their members and other stakeholders and to better communicate and manage information internally. We are not fundraising, and we are not adding new events to their calendar. We are trying to help the organization to communicate more effectively using free, readily available tools.

Your solutions cannot include hiring someone to deal with the issues that you have discovered. You are not allowed to change the mission or the policies of the organization.

Module 3 includes the following:

Progress Report #1	Project Charter: Organization choice, rules, roles, expectations and consequences.	Due 10.17.23
Proposal	Outline your analysis of the organization's online presence, define their mission and explore their goals, decide which deliverables would be most useful for the organization, and explain your choice of deliverables.	Due 10.24.23
Progress Report #2	Agenda (ch. 9.6) and meeting minutes (ch. 13.3).	Due 10.26.23

Progress Report #3	Gantt chart (ch. 9.7).	Due 11.2.23
Progress Report #4	RACI chart of tasks (ch. 9.6.1).	Due 11.9.23
Presentation s	Upload presentation to Blackboard by class time the day you present.	11.14.23 and 11.16.23
Three Deliverables	Recommendation report and your choice of **TWO** of the following: create a promotional flyer for your organization; create an infographic that the organization could use to educate; a social media campaign with at least five posts, appropriate hashtags, and maintenance instructions; a survey exploring communication preferences; a redesigned website using WordPress, Wix, or similar; a mockup of a mobile app.	Due 11.23.23

Progress Reports: 25 points each

Letters of Intent: 100 points

Oral Presentation: 150 points

Recommendation Report and Two Deliverables: 200 points

Letter of Intent: This Will be Your Proposal Document

According to 14.4 of our text, "A letter of intent is a short document that outlines the project you are intending to propose and some other basic information that is used to screen applicants for suitability."

Use the professional letter format; 14.4 provides a sample letter of intent. Your letter should be organized using the following headings: Online Presence, Mission and Goals, Proposed Deliverables, and Justification.

Presentation

Presentations should be approximately 10 minutes in length and should include a PowerPoint.

Each group member should have a roughly equal speaking role.

The goal of a presentation is to connect with your student organization's leadership team and to persuade them that your understanding of their mission and the community that they serve and that your solutions can help them to communicate more effectively. Use the following outline to guide both the content of your presentation and the content of your Recommendation Report.

I. Introduction

   A. Include full names of all group members

II. Overview of the Organization

   A. Background

   B. SOAR Analysis

III. Effective Communication Solutions

   A. What does your organization need to better communicate with their community and with the groups that they serve?

   B. Demonstrate your solutions.

   C. Why is your solution the best choice? Use the resources we have worked with in class, as well as other research to persuade your student organization's leadership team that your deliverables will help them to communicate more effectively. Anecdotal evidence is not sufficient.

IV. Results

   A. How will the student organization use the deliverables you are creating for them?

   B. What can the student organization expect should they implement your solution?

   C. What kind of maintenance will be required to keep your deliverables up to date?

V. Conclusion

Your presentation and your recommendation report should be written using professional diction and should be carefully proofread and free from errors. Photos should not obscure the text in your PowerPoint.

Three Deliverables

Recommendation Report: you should use the format from your presentation to organize your thoughts. ALL groups will submit a recommendation report.

Choose TWO of the following:

I. Create a one-page promotional flyer for the organization.

II. Create an infographic that the organization could use to educate the public about an issue important to the organization.

III. A social media campaign with at least five posts, appropriate hashtags, and maintenance instructions so that the members of the organization can keep the posts going.

IV. A 5-10 question survey to help the organization learn more about their audience's communication preferences (Note: your survey should ONLY focus on communication issues.).

V. A redesigned website using Wix or WordPress or a similar site.

VI. A mockup for a mobile app

Remember

All documents produced should be considered formal, professional documents, and the choices that you make for each of the components should be made with this in mind.

A4. Calendar Snapshot

Dear students,

Here is our calendar for our HE+ cluster. The dates are mostly flexible. I have also attached the assignment description for module 3 so that you can understand the scope of the project, the instructions, and the deliverables you will be creating for your org.

By September 22, you should have familiarized yourself with the following:

- Videos of lessons 1-3 from DeNardis Introduction to User Experience Design: https://learning.oreilly.com/videos/introduction-to-user/9780137534463/9780137534463-UED1_00_00_00/
- Understanding the Difference between UX and UI: https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/the-difference-between-ux-and-ui-design-a-laymans-guide/
- What Are UX Personas and How are they Used: https://www.uxdesigninstitute.com/blog/what-are-ux-personas/
- Information Architecture: https://usabilityhub.com/blog/information-architecture-in-ux

September 25-October 6

- Decide if you want to work with another student from our HE+ cluster.
- Select the student org you want to work with; you can choose an org that you are currently affiliated with.
- Schedule a Zoom meeting on a Monday, Wednesday, or Friday with me to discuss your choices, your questions, and your interview plans with your student org. If you are choosing to work as a group, we will meet as a group.

Conduct interviews with your student org by October 17, when module 3 begins. The final deliverables for the module are due on November 21.

Complete experience survey by December 5

I will be adding this to our cluster's Blackboard page, as well as the link we will use for our Zoom meetings.

Please let me know if you have any questions!

A5. Instructions for Interview Preparation

Dear students,

As you are scheduling your interviews and getting to know your groups and their communication needs, there were a couple of things that I wanted to mention.

- The level of formality of the interviews is up to you and the org that you are working will. These can be very casual chats, or they can be more structured. You can record them if you feel that it will be helpful for you, but it is not required.

- The focus of the interview should be on communication. How do they currently communicate with their audiences and members? What apps do they use? What platforms have been successful for them? What would they like to see? *Remember, we are prohibited from using TikTok by the mandate of Governor Greg Abbott.
- The focus of the conversations should be on helping the org communicate more effectively using free and readily available tools. WE are not building events for them, but if they need materials to communicate information about an event THEY are planning, that is fine. The same goes for fundraising and recruiting.

Please let me know if you have any questions! I am in my office (207 Humanities) from 11:00-12:20 Tuesdays and Thursdays, and I am also available via Zoom Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

A6. Instructions for Post-Delivery Meeting

Dear students,

We finished our presentations yesterday, and I was pleased with the way yours came together. Now we will move to the next stage, which is following up with the student org that we have chosen. After Thanksgiving, please schedule about 30 minutes with the leadership team of your org, share your deliverables with them, and then gather their feedback about the following questions.

1. How well have we understood the needs of your student org?
2. Was the choice of the deliverables appropriate for the organization?
3. Does the design of the deliverables meet the needs of the organization?
4. Is the information provided in the deliverables appropriate to the needs of the org?
5. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being we would not use this document and 10 being we plan to use this immediately, how likely would you be to recommend that your org use these documents?

In December, I will be following up with a quick survey about your experiences.

Appendix B: Expanded HE+ Information from Administrators

This appendix contains a series of communications from university and departmental administrators that conveyed the initial concept of HE+, from the Honors College dean (B1) and the assistant dean (B2) to the undergraduate director of technical communication (B3). A textual transcription of the Honors College's informational flyer (Figure 1. FAQ sheet) is included (B4).

B1. Dean's Communication

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you so much for being a part of our new way of reaching Honors students--Honors Enhanced courses (HE+)! The success of our pilot last Spring is eclipsed by current faculty enthusiasm and student interest: this Fall, we have **54** faculty in **eight** colleges teaching **56** HE+ sections, with over **550** Honors students participating! Thank you!

For those who are new to HE+, we have an FAQ (attached) which addresses the most common questions which arise out of HE+. You are the arbiter of what counts as an Honors enrichment in your field, and whether a student sufficiently fulfills the requirement for Honors credit. If you ever need a willing ear to bounce ideas off, mine are available (as are Chad's). 😊

You are at the center of our mission to cultivate the life of the mind and a spirit of adventure within our Honors students. How lucky they are to have you-- and how lucky we are to have you as partners! If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Have a fantastic semester!

Warmly,

Jill

Dean, Honors College

B2. Assistant Dean's Communication with Sample Pilot Courses and Stipend Information for HE+ Instructors

Hi Prof. G. & Prof. S.,

As you may be aware, the Honors College has implemented an innovative way for Texas Tech University students and faculty to participate in the Honors experience, Honors Enhanced courses (HE+). In HE+ sections, participating Honors students enroll in a standard/non-Honors section as well as a connected zero-hour/zero-cost HONS 0001 section reserved for Honors students. Instructors of HE+ sections agree to enrich their Honors students' experience in the class with an additional honors-enriched project reserved for them (whether a group project, inquiry-based, service or experiential learning, etc.), and they are paid a stipend by the Honors College to do so. I'm attaching additional information about HE+ courses.

With the HE+ pilot we ran in Spring 2023, below are a few examples of the honors-enriched endeavors that some of the instructors chose to provide for their Honors students:

In an ANSC 3301 (Principles of Nutrition) section, the IOR had participating Honors students complete a few assignments (including a budget worksheet) in conjunction with lab work related to the course's subject-matter.

- In a BIOL 3416 (Genetics) section, the IOR had each participating Honors student create and give a presentation on a well-known scientist in the field.
- In a CHEM 1305 (Chemical Basics) section, the IOR had participating Honors students complete a couple of assignments… one was case study on a chemical spill; the other was students' measuring their carbon footprint.
- In an ENGR 1320 (Engineering Problem Solving I) section, the IOR facilitated a once-a-month virtual meeting and had participating Honors students collectively contribute to a shared database of initiatives relevant to the course's subject-matter.
- In a SOC 1301 (Introduction to Sociology) section, the IOR had participating Honors students submit an essay assignment (3-5 pages, with works cited) at the end of the semester.

In consultation with Dr. S.H., we in the Honors College would like to have your ENGL 2311-008, 010, 011, & 042 course as an HE+ section during Fall 2023. Below are the Honors students enrolled in your lecture section and (as a subset) those who have enrolled in the connected HONS 0001-H24 section:

[Student information redacted.]

If you agree to facilitate the honors-enriched project for the Honors students in the HE+ cohort— assuming all of the Honors students enrolled in your lecture also enroll in the connected HONS 0001 section (or at least the vast majority of them)— we can provide a $3,000 stipend (split between the two of you).

Our hope is that HE+ sections will dramatically increase the number of students who can fulfill the curricular requirements to graduate with Honors as well as increase the number of faculty who can participate in teaching Honors students, not to mention be an engaging way for students to learn from Texas Tech University faculty.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

C.C.

Assistant Dean, Honors College

B3. Undergraduate Studies Director Communication

Dear S.,

Thanks for agreeing to pilot our Engl 2311 HE+ sections in the fall. I write with an update from C. C. Chad is an assistant academic dean in the Honors College and he will be able to answer any specific questions that you might have about the HE+ courses. As they have these set up, Honors students will be able to enroll (1-2 per class at most) in your different sections. The Honors college will identify these students to you and then you can draw on the following set of instructions to supervise their participation in a supplementary honors-enriched activity/project/assignment. Chad writes:

"I'm glad to provide basic feedback based on what we know from instructors who are a part of the pilot this spring. Some are setting it up where there is not a collective time when they get together synchronistically, but do an asynchronous check-in on a common platform (e.g., a MS Team page or Blackboard). For those who have arranged a set time to meet, we have expressed our preference that it be no more than once a month (or three times total during the term max) – I'm aware of one prof who has set a Zoom/Teams session at a mutually beneficial time at that frequency (with 8 students in her HE+ group), and it seems to work.

We in the Honors College do not want to be overly prescriptive – yet we're always glad to provide feedback and encouragement and advisement in an effort to better serve all stakeholders in the HE+ endeavor."

To sum up, you don't have to do anything special as part of your in class delivery or content. Instead, you'd offer some supplementary instructional content to support your HE+ students asynchronously or minimally synchronously alongside your normal course. It also sounds like what this assignment could be is entirely up to you.

K. and/or I would be happy to work with you. I'd encourage you to be as creative as you have time for! You could also work with J.T. and R.G. in the UX lab to have students do some sort of supplemental hands on work that they could then write up—that sort of thing.

S.H.

Director of BA in Technical Communication

B4. Transcriptions from Figure 1. Faculty-Facing FAQ Poster (2023) from the Honors College

HE+ FAQ | Texas Tech University Honors College

Q: Do I need to compose a syllabus for the HONS 0001 section connected with my course?

A: No! HE+ sections do not differ in course objectives, and the enrichment does not need to be graded.

Q: How will I report that Honors students sufficiently completed the enrichment activity?

A: Asst. Dean C.C. will reach out to all HE+ faculty prior to the end of term to ensure students receive Honors credit.

Q: How many students are required for HE+ and when do they need to enroll?

A: A minimum of 3 students are required for an HE+ section to make. Students must add in Fall by August 29th.

Q: Do I need to issue a grade for the honors-enriched assignment/activity with HE+?

A: No! We need to know the students completed the enrichment sufficiently to earn Honors credit.

Q: If I plan on meeting with Honors students for HE+, how often should I meet with them?

A: HE+ isn't a new course prep, doesn't impact faculty workload, and doesn't add SCH for students. Consider 1x/month or 3x/semester.

Q: Are stipends paid directly to faculty, and when are they paid?

A: All HE+ faculty receive a sliding-scale stipend based on enrollment, paid directly to faculty, paid after the 12th day of classes.

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The Synergy of ‘Design Thinking and Communication’ and Its New Faculty Mentoring Program

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Abstract Design Thinking and Communication (“DTC”) is an interdisciplinary university program designed primarily for first-year engineering students at Northwestern University. Positive interdependence exists at the heart of this 27-year-old program, which brings together two seemingly disparate disciplines. The program contains two courses that combine instruction in communication with instruction in engineering design and are taught jointly by an instructor from each discipline. This creates a rich and diverse learning experience for students and a powerful pedagogical experience for faculty.

New faculty join the DTC program every quarter. In their first two quarters, new faculty are paired in co-teaching relationships with experienced faculty. The resulting relationship is an example of the positive interdependence present within DTC. The experienced teacher shares their knowledge of the program, while the new teacher shares innovative ideas and approaches.

Teaching in an established program can be challenging, so the DTC director team created a mentoring program for new faculty. The program utilizes best practices and consists of an orientation, weekly cohort meetings, faculty observations, and faculty reflections. New faculty have the opportunity to learn from each other and from the program directors. Each element of the mentoring program is designed to help new faculty develop pedagogical strategies for teaching the established DTC framework, while also guiding them toward experiencing a sense of belonging and inclusion. Many new faculty remark that the co-teaching relationship and the mentoring program are pivotal to their success in teaching DTC.

Keywords co-teaching relationships, collaborative teaching models, design thinking and communication, faculty mentorship programs, first-year engineering curriculum, higher education faculty development, inclusion, positive interdependence, professional development

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Introduction

In her 2023 presentation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Lisa Del Torto spoke about positive interdependence and its role in collaborative teaching relationships. Specifically, Del Torto referenced David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson's 2009 study, which focused on the concept of positive interdependence; this occurs "when the actions of individuals promote the achievement of joint goals," leading to new insight and discovery (p. 366). Situated within the concepts of positive interdependence, individuals facilitate each other's goals, and in so doing, obtain greater achievements than they would if they'd been working alone. This type of collaboration fosters comprehensive program growth and well-being. Del Torto gave her presentation as one of a panel of faculty who teach Design Thinking and Communication (hereafter "DTC") at Northwestern University. DTC is an interdisciplinary initiative designed primarily for first-year engineering students that functions similarly to a structured program. Offered jointly by the Segal Design Institute and the Cook Family Writing Program, DTC embeds instruction in communication with instruction in engineering design across two courses – Design 106-1/2 and English 106-1/2. DTC is home to 500+ students, 45+ faculty, and 1,000+ annual enrollments. Faculty hold a range of job titles, including postdocs, adjuncts, teaching track professors, and tenure track and tenured professors. Across every course section, a communication instructor is paired with an engineering design instructor. At the heart of DTC is the concept of positive interdependence, which is greatly enhanced by our new faculty mentoring program. In this article, I review the basics of DTC and address all aspects of the new faculty mentoring program, highlighting the collaborative impact it creates within the DTC program. I incorporate both faculty survey responses and my own formal and informal observations from my experience as a DTC director and individual who once engaged in DTC as a new faculty member.

Northwestern's Interdisciplinary First-Year Design Program

Design and communication share a common goal that creates a dynamic interplay within the DTC program. Each discipline is iterative and relies on drafts to accommodate the user experience. In DTC, students are paired with community project partners to develop user-centered solutions that address unmet needs in areas such as healthcare, accessibility, and sustainability. Each section of DTC receives its own project partner or partners, although the same partner(s) may work with students in more than one section. Throughout the partnership, students communicate with their project partners in emails, reports, and final presentations.

A common thread through both communication and design is primary and secondary research. Students conduct and document project partner interviews, user observations, and user testing. They use their well-documented primary research to inform their design process. What starts as a seed of an idea in week 2 becomes a mockup in week 5 and often a prototype in week 10. Students tap into the dual disciplines of engineering design and communication, using lessons from their engineering design and communication instructors to guide their process. Within this interdependence of instructors and disciplines, first-year engineering students learn that using written, verbal and mathematical communication not only helps them present their designs to a variety of audiences but actually helps them in the process of creating their designs. This, then, prepares them for internships and eventual careers where they will be successful and competent engineers and communicators.

DTC has existed for 27 years. It began in 1997 as a collaborative effort between three engineering professors and three writing professors. Part of the "Engineering First" initiative, this program was developed for first-year engineering students. Prior to the development of the program, first-year engineering students were required to cross from their home school, McCormick School of Engineering, into the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, where they obtained their writing course credit by taking English 105. According to Northwestern University's course catalog, English 105 is defined as emphasizing all phases of the composition process, in addition to research methods and critical thinking, and also including careful review of student papers and reports (Northwestern University, 2024). While it remains a worthwhile course, it wasn't created with engineering students in mind. Early DTC leaders meeting in 1997 wanted the required communication course to be something that engineering students would find particularly meaningful and relevant.

When the then-dean of McCormick asked his engineering faculty to create such a course, those faculty realized they needed to enlist the help of professors from Northwestern's Writing Program. Penny Hirsch, the first Writing Program Director of DTC and Associate Director of the Writing Program, remembers meeting regularly for a year with a committee of three writing faculty and three engineering faculty to explore how a fusion of disciplines could be achieved. Together, the program pioneers created Engineering Design and Communication ("EDC"), the precursor to Design Thinking and Communication. After much discussion, they realized how much the iterative writing and design processes resemble each other and thus decided that the curriculum would give equal weight to each and the course would be team-taught. This approach differed from the more common integration of writing into engineering courses where writing instruction was subordinate to engineering and focused mostly on editing skills. The early leaders also chose to include the word "communication" in the course title (as opposed to a word such as "writing") to acknowledge that engineering communication is multimodal and discipline-transcendent. It includes written reports, research protocols, project partner communications, equations, measurements, graphics, mission statements, ethical writing, oral presentations, interview scripts, and more. Program leaders decided that students would earn equal credit between the two disciplines—one credit of engineering program work and one credit of writing program work (Hirsch, 2016).[1]

With equal weight given to both disciplines, the program pioneers set out in 1997 to learn each other's disciplines so they could teach in a way that made each discipline stronger, invoking the positive interdependence between communication and engineering design. They presented together at conferences; they traveled abroad to speak with foreign schools about the program; and they wrote journal articles. Because of her work in EDC, Hirsch was chosen as one of two people to represent Northwestern's Segal Design Institute at the National Academy of Engineering's Frontiers of Engineering Education (FOEE) symposium. She and other key founding faculty from Engineering First were nominated for the National Academy of Engineering Bernard M. Gordon Prize for Innovation in Engineering and Technology Education. It was at these kinds of conferences that Hirsch and other leaders shared their innovations with other faculty (Hirsch, 2016).

And so, the DTC program was born from the roots of a positively interdependent relationship between professors from two seemingly disparate disciplines. As Hirsch (2016) has noted, students wrote for real audiences and designed for real users. Students engaged in individual classes and also in the larger community, learning how to integrate important communication skills such as revision, editing, research, composition, and speaking into a curriculum that had them designing projects for real users. This framework remains in use today.

Equality has always been an important element of DTC. There are no lead instructors in DTC; all instructors are equal, no matter one's rank. This is something many faculty note as one of their favorite parts about teaching in DTC. Engineering design and communication instructors are present for the entirety of every class session and share equal time teaching the course. They meet to divide teaching

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[1] Here, it's important to note that courses at Northwestern University are typically one-unit, which is equivalent to the three-unit or four-unit courses offered by most other universities. Students in DTC enroll in both courses in the sequence, each of which offers 1 credit of course work (.5 credit of engineering course credit and .5 credit of writing course credit). For both courses combined, this adds up to 2 credits of course work (1 credit of engineering course credit and 1 credit of writing course credit).

responsibilities prior to stepping into the classroom. Because of the commonality of both disciplines, sometimes they even teach at the same time. This partnership approach extends to grading; both instructors meet at the end of each quarter to discuss final assignments and calculate final grades. Because DTC was formed from the nucleus of two courses (design thinking and writing), both of which are necessary for the first-year curriculum, the Cook Family Writing Program and Segal Design Institute are able to justify this equal partnership, which includes paying two instructors to teach DTC. The heart of DTC resides in the benefit to students, who get to experience both disciplines at the same time, while learning from an expert of each.

The proof that DTC faculty find success is discovered in the number of faculty who teach DTC over multiple years. Several faculty have taught DTC for decades. A couple have even taught DTC since the program's inception or close thereafter.

The New Faculty Mentoring Program

Taking steps to ensure faculty satisfaction is important to DTC leaders. During the 2015-16 academic year, DTC leaders conducted a study on faculty satisfaction and experience with teaching DTC. The results indicated that faculty wanted a formal mentoring system for new faculty (Hirsch, 2016). Such a program would provide new faculty with the tools necessary for teaching this well-established course, while also helping them to understand the important elements that go into the co-teaching partnership. In addition, it would provide experienced faculty with co-teachers who were already prepared to teach, thus alleviating the burden of having to both mentor new faculty and teach a full class of students.

Acting on the survey, DTC leaders created a mentoring system. The system included a quarterly orientation for new faculty and as-needed 15-minute check-ins. That concept was further developed in Fall 2017 when Lisa Del Torto and Alex Birdwell, the DTC co-directors (Del Torto from the Cook Family Writing Program and Birdwell from the Segal Design Institute) designated time for an expected, though not required weekly hour-long meeting for the full cohort of new faculty who came from both the Writing Program and Segal. During those meetings, new faculty met with program leadership and reflected upon their experiences teaching DTC. In addition, the co-directors shared resources and advice on co-teaching, grading, giving feedback, managing the workload, supporting student teams, etc. In the fall of 2020, I began working with Del Torto as the Writing Program's incoming DTC Director and helped to continue the mentoring program. In the summer of 2022, I conducted research into best practices for faculty mentoring programs. Starting in the fall of 2022, I codified the weekly meetings with Birdwell, turning them into established and mandatory new faculty cohorts[2]. We also developed the mentoring program to include observations and reflections, which enable new faculty to learn from reflection-in-action.

First Point of Contact

The first point of contact for all new faculty is, of course, the hiring process. New faculty are often recommended for teaching roles by experienced faculty. Others find DTC through word-of-mouth or open position advertisements posted on the Writing Program's website. However new faculty discover DTC, the first part of onboarding is the interview. As the Writing Program's one-time Director of DTC, I have noticed that during the interview, one question almost always arises: What support, if any, do new DTC instructors receive? Many new faculty view DTC as a massive undertaking, and in many ways, it is. It's a decades-old program that combines two very different disciplines into one course. Materials, course calendars, and lessons have already been created and disseminated into the common DTC course infrastructure system, generally Canvas. New faculty often wonder whether they'll be able to keep pace with the requirements for successfully teaching a course that's already been created, and not by their own design.

Fortunately, one of the cornerstones of DTC is that even though the program is well-established, there is always room for diversification. When I interview new faculty, I tell them all about the onboarding and mentoring process, and I notice that they begin to visibly relax. I also tell them that even in this decades-old course, there is always room for innovation. *Their* innovation. Each faculty member possesses expertise in a certain subject area. Some are experienced researchers. Others are experienced with technical writing, or ethical writing, or reflective writing. Some faculty are theater experts skilled in public speaking and giving presentations. On the engineering design side, faculty bring expertise in subjects like sketching, electronics, mechanics, and computer science. DTC is structured around enabling faculty to not only teach about their expertise, but also to lend their expertise to the creation of program materials, weekly lectures, and faculty meetings. Each time DTC leadership spearheads the creation of new curriculum, they call upon faculty to create materials using their unique expertise. As a result, faculty have created everything from ethics workshops to sustainability toolkits to chapters on teamwork and research.

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[2] New faculty cohorts range in size from one new faculty member to about six or seven. Cohorts are always led by the two DTC directors. One director is a faculty member with the Cook Family Writing Program; the other is a faculty member with Segal Design Institute.

New DTC instructors have remarked that they learn two things fairly quickly. First, they learn that new faculty voices matter. Indeed, the DTC program champions the inclusion of new voices. Second, they learn that they will engage in an in-depth mentoring program, beginning with an orientation, working through six weeks of meetings with a new faculty cohort, and culminating in a final reflection written by the new faculty members and shared with DTC program directors. Many new faculty are relieved to learn they have so much support. And isn't that the point? By supporting new faculty, the DTC program ensures their successful integration into the program, while also providing them with the resources necessary for their retention and success.

Partners in Education: The DTC Teaching Partnership

Another thing new faculty learn during the onboarding process is that each DTC class is partner-taught by a communication instructor and an engineering design instructor. New teachers are always paired with instructors who have experience teaching DTC. For example, a new communication instructor will always be paired with an engineering design instructor who has taught DTC several times before. This pairing serves two purposes. First, it ensures that the course is taught by subject matter experts. Second, it creates a level of positive interdependence. The experienced instructor understands both the communication and engineering design elements, while the new instructor brings their unique viewpoint to an established course and the knowledge they're gaining in the new faculty cohorts. The experienced instructor guides the new instructor in course design, while also benefiting from the new instructor's fresh perspective. While the experienced instructor isn't an official mentor, they serve an important role in onboarding because they're present for each of the new faculty member's first experiences in teaching the course and can therefore guide and direct as necessary. As such, what might have been two halves becomes a single, interdependent whole, greater than both parts.

Experienced DTC instructors often guide new DTC instructors during class, offering gentle reminders or bits of information about course happenings. For example, in the third week of term, students are instructed to come to class ready to brainstorm ideas for their project. To facilitate the effort, many instructors set out bowls of Skittles and M&Ms to "energize" their students for the fast-paced brainstorming session. (There are many large bags of both treats stored away within the deepest closets and darkest offices of Segal.) At the beginning of the class session, instructors hand out dozens of sticky notes with the expectation that by the end of class, each sticky note will contain some element of a design – a word, sketch or concept. Instructors then lead students through different brainstorming activities. These activities result in students rushing to the white boards and posting their sticky notes. Soon, every white board is covered with yellow pieces of paper containing pencil scratchings and the beginnings of fabulous ideas.

In the midst of all this, new DTC instructors often stand with their mouths slightly open as they survey the chaos of their once peaceful classroom. These new instructors are sometimes unsure what to do and are many times enjoying just watching their students. In these moments, experienced DTC instructors will offer new DTC instructors suggestions for how they, too, can help shepherd the creative chaos. Eventually, new instructors jump into the fray, often nibbling on a handful of Skittles or M&Ms, and begin offering tips and encouragement, helping students reach new heights with their ideas. During new faculty meetings, new instructors report they’ve never been a part of anything like the brainstorming session, but they loved every moment.

The type of guidance offered to new DTC instructors by experienced DTC instructors during brainstorming is common in the DTC classroom, but it’s also kept to a minimum. I’ve learned that experienced DTC instructors frequently shy away from offering guidance during instructional moments because they don’t want to impede on their teaching partner’s pedagogy. As a result, much of their guidance comes during weekly teaching partner meetings. In an anonymous survey disseminated online via Qualtrics during the winter of 2023, which was sent to members of the new faculty cohort and their co-teachers, and which aimed to assess the effectiveness of the new faculty mentoring program, one experienced DTC instructor noted, “My co-teacher and I generally meet every week to plan ahead, which greatly reduces any stress.” A new DTC instructor stated, “Meeting with my teaching partner before class each week is very helpful, if not crucial, to my sense of preparedness.” During these meetings, both partners will decide on the week’s lessons and activities, and then divide pedagogical responsibilities. While both instructors are always present in the classroom, sometimes one instructor will lead a lesson while the other offers silent support, or both instructors offer a lesson collectively.

One collective lesson may be developing the project’s mission statement. The mission statement is a concise summary of the problem which is “solution-independent” and contains “measurable goals” (Yarnoff et al., 2020, p. 33). To provide an example, consider the mission statement written by DTC students who were asked to develop a way for an individual to easily loop and unloop a resistance band for use with physical therapy exercises. While physical therapy bands are often looped by tying a square knot, untying the knot can be difficult and time-consuming. Students given this project interviewed their project partner, and conducted primary and secondary research, after which they wrote the following mission statement: "[T]o improve the use of therapy bands by designing an adjustable, quick, and safe attachable module that allows for easy connection and adjustment and minimizes the possibility for abrasions or any other related injuries." This mission statement identifies "success elements," or aspects of the design when, if met, would mean students had achieved success in meeting their goal for the project, or mission. Examples of success elements include the words and phrases "adjustable," "quick," "safe," "easy connection," and "minimizes the possibility for abrasions." Each of these words and phrases is measurable. Once students develop a mockup of what will potentially be their final design, they have their project partner test the mockup to determine whether it is, among other things, "adjustable," "safe," and allowed for "easy connection." Sounds simple, right? However, guiding students toward writing a concise mission statement which contains measurable terms can be quite challenging.

Students might just as easily have written, "To improve the use of therapy bands by designing a convenient module." But how do you define "convenient?" What is convenient to one person might not be as convenient to another. Arguably, the words "quick" and "easy connection" might also be debated, which is why instructors have students define key terms. The point is that in writing a mission statement, students must consider both the design elements and the language elements. This, then, requires the teaching expertise of both instructors. The engineering design instructor helps students conceptualize the design, while the communication instructor helps students write terms which are easily quantifiable. For new DTC instructors, this is an opportunity to work collectively with their teaching partner to guide their students in a lesson integral to the overall success of their DTC project. Generally, teaching partners use their weekly meetings to plan collective lessons, defining roles in order to create memorable and important lessons for students.

Sometimes, teaching partners use weekly meetings to decide on new approaches to the DTC curriculum. As aforementioned, new DTC instructors are encouraged to incorporate unique approaches to pedagogy. In fact, one experienced DTC instructor noted how important it is for new DTC instructors to feel comfortable incorporating their own pedagogical methods. This instructor stated, "Most of the people I have taught with have brought new things into the class," which is something the instructor noted they particularly valued. In fact, experienced DTC instructors are chosen for this co-teaching relationship based on their willingness to teach with new instructors and also on their ability to foster the growth and development of new instructors. One experienced DTC instructor stated, "I would like to continue to make sure that the opportunities DTC offers—not only to those who choose to take it, but also those who choose to teach it—are not taken for granted. And I don't want to take them for granted, either." For this faculty member and others, teaching with new faculty serves as a way to connect with the opportunities inherent in teaching within the DTC program. Another faculty member noted that they trust the directors to pair them with new faculty who have something unique to offer the DTC program. Experienced DTC instructors learn much from the teaching partnership, as new instructors bring new ideas and offer a chance to see the program through new eyes.

For their part, new DTC instructors also value the co-teaching relationship. One new DTC instructor stated, "The support provided to new instructors via faculty meetings and co-teaching with an experienced professor make me much more comfortable than I could be otherwise." Another new DTC instructor noted, "I very much appreciate the collegiality of DTC and I am learning to be a better teacher by listening to and observing my peers." This speaks to the positive interdependence present in the co-teaching relationship; both teaching partners bring unique insights and grow together to engage with the opportunities offered by the partnership. This type of mentoring provides benefits to both the new and experienced faculty member, who learn from one another's innovation and experience (Cordie, Brecke, Lin & Wooten, 2020; Johnson & Johnson, 2009). For new DTC instructors, the co-teaching relationship provides guidance and a sense of belonging, as they're paired with an instructor who truly wants to see them succeed.

Of course, the teaching partnership isn't without its faults. Sometimes, there is friction and the co-teaching relationship falters. Some examples of friction may include disagreements about division of responsibilities and class time, or differences in teaching and learning philosophies. To navigate conflict, many co-teachers will engage in productive one-on-ones, working through their issues and developing plans of action. Most of the time, they're successful in their efforts. At times, co-teachers will approach the DTC directors for support. In my experience, instructors generally view this as a last resort.

When we as directors meet with co-teachers, we're careful to provide them with space to hold their own conversations and make their own plans. We only interject when mediation becomes necessary. In my experience as a director, these meetings almost always resolve amicably, with the co-teachers ready for a fresh start. Once or twice, they've ended less amicably. But that's an outlier and definitely outside the scope of this paper.

New Faculty Cohorts

Another important element of DTC's new faculty mentoring program is the new faculty cohort. Prior to the beginning of their first quarter teaching DTC, new DTC instructors are provided with a packet of information. Such enrollment packets are important for helping them understand the DTC teaching experience (Lumpkin, 2011). The DTC enrollment packet includes the common DTC syllabus, DTC co-teaching guidelines, a co-teaching conversation starter, and ways to respond to students in distress. It also includes a welcome letter inviting new DTC instructors to an orientation. During the orientation, the DTC directors go over the materials in the packet, fostering open discussion. New DTC instructors explore the DTC curriculum; learn about the co-teaching relationship; and discuss pedagogical strategies for fostering student well-being and success. During this orientation meeting, new DTC instructors also meet one another for the first time. This first meeting is crucial because new DTC instructors will meet together in new faculty cohorts for the first six weeks of the quarter. After one orientation, a new DTC instructor remarked, "I very much appreciate the collegiality of DTC."

That same new DTC instructor also stated that "I am concerned that I do not know the material well enough." The six weekly meetings help new DTC instructors become more comfortable with the material. During these meetings, new DTC instructors receive direction from the DTC directors. Meetings generally begin with the DTC directors going over that week's course assignments and discussing the various pedagogical approaches other DTC instructors have used to ensure student success. DTC directors also open the floor up for discussion, offering new DTC instructors an opportunity to suggest other ways for approaching DTC assignments. As an example, there are a number of different ways different DTC instructors have implemented the brainstorming activity discussed in the previous section. Some pass out sticky notes. Others have students draw sketches for homework. Some instructors have students come to class with dozens of ideas already written down. Brainstorming is such a creative activity in the DTC course sequence that it provides a unique opportunity for new DTC instructors to tap into their unique ideas. During a weekly mentoring session, DTC directors might invite new instructors to share their ideas with the group. They might also encourage the group to build upon those ideas. This type of collaboration sparks new approaches and collective creativity. These meetings turn into round table sessions where new instructors across both disciplines—communication and engineering design—engage in shared learning. This learning is often spontaneous and results in a building-on of ideas. New DTC instructors report feelings of inclusion and equity as they develop a positive collaborative relationship with DTC directors and with other new instructors. Thus, these meetings act as a space for the continued development of rapport and support, fostering a sense of belonging and psychological safety (Lumpkin, 2011).

During weekly meetings, new DTC instructors also have time for open discussion. One new DTC instructor stated, "Our weekly new faculty meetings are a fantastic opportunity to discuss the upcoming classes and ask questions." Often, these share-outs result in the development of camaraderie among new faculty members, who share positive experiences and student/instructor successes. At other times, new DTC instructors share challenges. For example, a new DTC instructor might face difficulties with engaging students in teams, which is an essential unit for the DTC student experience. Students in DTC classes work together in teams of three to five throughout the quarter, and at times, these teams experience conflict. During one new faculty mentoring session, a new DTC instructor voiced a concern that one of his teams was falling behind with work. The members of the new faculty cohort offered this new DTC instructor encouragement and support. The directors suggested that he schedule a meeting with his team, ensuring his co-teacher was also present. At the next cohort of new faculty, the new DTC instructor reported back that the team was starting to thrive, and that the discussion he'd held with the team and his co-teacher proved very helpful.

In many ways, the new faculty cohort is an example of positive interdependence. New DTC instructors from both disciplines come together to discuss their classes, their pedagogy, and their students. Engineering design instructors learn from communication instructors, and vice versa. Both groups meet with the DTC directors, who share their experience and knowledge of the course. In this way, the experienced meets the new, different disciplines converge, and both grow together to create new approaches for student and instructor success. One new DTC instructor noted, "DTC is unlike any course I have taught before. Usually, I am given material or subject to teach. I learn it and know what I am going to say when I walk in the classroom. That's not the way DTC works. There is more of a sense of guidance than instruction, something I am not used to but am coming to appreciate and enjoy."

Observation and Reflection

While the new faculty cohort has been a staple since the fall of 2017 and the co-teaching relationship has existed since the beginning of DTC, a relatively new inclusion is observation and reflection. Observation occurs relatively early, typically within the first few weeks of the ten- to eleven-week quarter. Many new faculty are anxious about this aspect of the mentoring program. They're still learning the course and pedagogical strategies for teaching DTC, and some wonder whether they'll pass muster in an evaluation – particularly one handled by a DTC director.

During my time as the Writing Program's Director of Design Thinking and Communication, I was always quick to reassure new DTC faculty. The observation does not exist to evaluate whether a new DTC instructor is fit to teach DTC, I told them. Rather, it exists so a DTC director can learn more about the new DTC instructor's pedagogical approach, which helps to strengthen mentoring.

To keep the observation neutral, I engage in an ethnographic observation. I visit the class session and sit well-removed from the class, in a place as inconspicuous as possible. Indeed, sometimes the instructors remark that they've forgotten I was even in the room. During the observation, I take notes on everything that happens in the class session, and only what happens in the class session. Once the session has concluded, I read through my notes, then add my own insights about what went well and what might potentially have gone better. In the two years observations have been conducted, what went well far outweighs what could have gone better, and I'm generally very complimentary. Again, observations exist primarily to learn more about the way the new DTC instructor approaches teaching.

Observations provide the DTC directors an access point into the new DTC instructor's teaching experience. As Uwe Flick (2011) points out, "Ethnography is interested in analyzing the making of social situations by taking part in the relevant processes and by observing how they unfold" (p. 97). The experienced DTC instructor who partners with the new DTC instructor has the opportunity to take part in the relevant processes throughout the course, which makes them uniquely qualified to serve as a mentor. The DTC directors, who serve as mentors during the new faculty cohorts, may use the observations as opportunities to "learn by seeing" or observing, which then gives them the knowledge to help the new DTC instructor achieve success.

During one memorable class session, I watched a new DTC instructor engage with the brainstorming session discussed earlier. This instructor was hesitant at first but soon learned the rhythm of brainstorming. By the end of the class, the instructor was engaging in deep discussion with his students, helping them develop new and different ideas. Due to his encouragement, his class became even more excited about their project.

By observing the interactions within this new DTC instructor's classroom, I was able to pinpoint when the change occurred. I spoke with the instructor about it afterward. The instructor was eager to learn more about what I had observed. By discussing the moment of change with me, he was able to further develop his pedagogy to include additional opportunities for student/instructor engagement. This type of positive interdependence between me and the new instructor led to greater insight and clarity.

The final aspect of DTC mentoring also involves a level of positive interdependence. Once the course is complete, the new DTC instructor is invited to reflect on their experience. What went well? What might have gone better? Both the observation and the reflection allow for reflection-on-action or reflecting on a teaching event after it has transpired, which has been shown through research to be pivotal in the continued development and success of teachers (Pinsky, Monson & Irby, 1998). Donald Schön (1982) writes about reflection, "In this process, which is essential to the acquisition of a skill, the feelings of which we are initially aware become internalized in our tacit knowing" (p. 52). Through reflection, Schön (1982, 1987) holds, the individual grows in knowledge based in discovery of self and of others through whom they work collaboratively.

New DTC instructors put a great deal of insight into their reflections. They enjoy looking back and looking forward. They've reached a pivotal moment in their DTC careers; they've successfully taught their first DTC course, and they now have the confidence they can teach DTC again. Reflecting on their pedagogy gives them the opportunity to build strategies for teaching future DTC classes. Their new confidence allows them to both develop their own pedagogy, and also to help the DTC directors understand their experiences as new faculty. In their written reflections, new DTC instructors inform the DTC director team what went well with the DTC course and what might have gone better. Sometimes, they discuss what might have gone better not just for themselves but also offer strategy suggestions for the program as a whole. This, then, presents a new type of positive interdependence. This collaboration between directors and new instructors leads to opportunities for program growth and development. Both parties benefit from the positive interdependence present within the relationship. And both benefit because they know the new DTC instructor has succeeded in their endeavor and will likely be back to teach DTC again. The DTC program has retained a successful instructor.

The Benefits of DTC's New Faculty Mentoring Program

There are many benefits associated with mentoring new faculty, both for the new faculty and for the department and university. New faculty enjoy relationship-building with other colleagues, increased productivity, personal growth, feelings of belonging and support, job satisfaction, and a smoother transition into the program, all hallmarks of successful mentoring programs (Lumpkin, 2009; Sorcinelli & Yun, 2010; Lumpkin, 2011). Over the last three years, the DTC program has experienced rapid growth. During that time, we've welcomed over three dozen new faculty members. Almost every one of those new faculty members has taken part in the DTC mentoring program, and almost all have gone on to teach DTC in additional quarters. Many echo the sentiments of this new DTC instructor: "I hope to grow as a teacher." Many have thanked the DTC directors for instilling them with the confidence necessary for success and stated that the DTC mentoring program has offered them a place of support and belonging. They've told the directors that the mentoring program gave them the resources necessary for pedagogical growth. Several have gone on to take part in pilot studies designed to bring new material to DTC. Others have gone on to leadership roles. One faculty member who joined the DTC program in 2021 and took part in the new faculty mentoring program has just become the newest DTC director, taking over for me. With the addition of our new faculty, DTC is going strong. We're hopeful it will continue to thrive for another 27 years.

Conclusion and Takeaways

The longevity and success of DTC invariably comes with some important takeaways. The first, and perhaps most important, is that it *can* be done. Two instructors can successfully teach a course together, even if they're from two completely different fields. New faculty can be made to feel welcome and encouraged to teach to their unique strengths and their students' unique needs—even in a program that has been going strong for decades. Engineering design and communication can coexist in a way that creates "the achievement of joint goals," and leads to new insight and discovery (Johnson & Johnson, 2009, p. 366).

Another takeaway is that new faculty mentoring programs are essential for success—not only of new faculty, but also of their students. When new faculty are equipped with pedagogical tools, knowledge of the program, and connections to other instructors, they can focus on effective teaching. Teaching partnerships also benefit. Indeed, experienced teachers note relief when they realize their co-teacher doesn't need mentoring but is already an effective educator and partner.

A final takeaway? If faculty feel heard, if they feel supported, they will develop a sense of belonging in the program. In turn, this creates collective ownership—a true programmatic community. And that's what we've created in DTC.

There's a reason the title of this article highlights the 'synergy' of Design Thinking and Communication. Throughout, I've emphasized how DTC is built on the concept of positive interdependence. This collaborative approach supports a structure where each member of the DTC community experiences greater success than if they were acting alone. In essence, the entire program is predicated on the effects of synergy.

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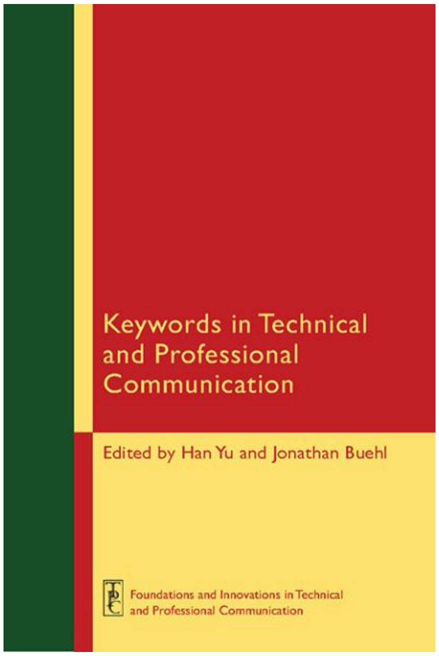

Keywords in Technical and Professional Communication

Authors: Han Yu & Jonathan Buehl
Place of Publication: University Press of Colorado
Publisher: WAC Clearinghouse
Date of Publication: 2023
Number of Pages: 336

Reviewed by
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Keywords history of TPC, keywords, research agendas, rhetoric, technical and professional communication, writing studies

The field of technical and professional communication (TPC) has a deep and evolving history, and the editors of *Keywords in Technical and Professional Communication,* Han Yu and Jonathan Buehl, have added to not only the history of the TPC field but also the keyword essay genre with this edited collection. The editors note that "The keyword essay collection has emerged as a unique academic genre composed of short essays that discuss the multiple and sometimes conflicting uses of words central to a discipline" (p. 7). In this collection, the editors aim to document the evolving complexity of TPC terminology while also serving as a resource for scholars unfamiliar with certain keywords in TPC and their usage across the field's theories, disciplines, types, practices, and features. Rather than presenting a traditional bibliography or anthology, this work conveys this knowledge through a collection of keyword essays.

Yu and Buehl have also assembled a list of well-established TPC scholars to help contribute to this collection of keywords. They found the contributors through survey suggestions, literature searches, and expertise in TPC. Additionally, the editors conducted literature searches in TPC journals and books to identify scholars with extensive publications on each keyword. Moreover, contributors followed structured guidelines to ensure consistency, addressing their assigned keywords' historical context, key debates, and future implications. Furthermore, the editors acknowledged potential biases against emerging and marginalized voices.

The forward, written by Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart A. Selber, offers a thoughtful reflection on TPC, emphasizing the field's complexity, interdisciplinarity, and adaptiveness. The authors build on Carolyn Rude's (2015) chapter on the keyword "technical communication," published in *Keywords in Writing Studies,* where they agree the future of TPC "depends on articulating and delivering on comprehensible research agendas" (p. xii). Moreover, this collection of keywords for the field can aid those in TPC in formulating their research agendas.

In their editors' introduction, to frame why the field of TPC needs a collection of keywords, Yu and Buehl outline a thorough history of how TPC has been organized in the past. For example, a 1966 bibliography was published to help those interested in learning more about technical writing. The editors show an example of how the bibliography was organized to highlight why this collection of keywords is needed. What's more, the editors note, "the key terms of the field we now call technical and professional communication (TPC) have a rich history that is worth both documenting and updating" (p. 3). "For example, forms of the word *rhetoric* appear only five times in the 1966 bibliography but 45 times in the 1983 bibliography, which suggests the increasing importance of rhetoric as a framing concept for the field" (p. 3). Also, this collection helps advance the field of TPC, as the editors updated the various keywords found in Johnson-Eilola and Selber's (2004) *Central Works in Technical Communication* as the twentieth anniversary approached.

There are other keyword books for different fields of study; this collection is not much different, as it does not provide definitions from a dictionary but goes into great detail about the histories and how the keywords are used in specific fields. Yu and Buehl argue that "it is not our intention here to define or redefine "TPC" vis-à-vis "writing studies." We merely hope to demonstrate that the field of TPC has considerable depth, width, complexities, and nebulousness on/in its own terms. Given decades of development and processes of professionalization, it has accumulated its own share of thorny keywords that are well worth documenting and unpacking" (p. 9). Technical communication is much more complex than just a keyword found in a chapter, and this collection of keywords that have been integrated into the field shows the importance of keyword studies in tracing the field's disciplinary boundaries, key debates, and evolving terminology.

This collection includes 39 keyword chapters arranged alphabetically in the table of contents. The editors have thoughtfully grouped and organized the keywords into thematic categories such as (theoretical orientations, disciplinary orientations, types of TPC, TPC practices, and features of TPC). This collection of keywords can serve as a guide to show how far the field of TPC has come and continues to evolve. This book helps to push and inform research agendas with its in-depth explanation of each keyword. For example, if a TPC practitioner is interested in how research has evolved in TPC, chapter 28 on the keyword *research* written by Chris Lam, emphasizes research in TPC as a systematic, purposeful process—not just a product or data activity. New and experienced instructors alike, whether embarking on their journey in technical and professional communication pedagogy or seeking to refresh their approach, will find chapter 22 on *pedagogy* written by Tracy Bridgeford helpful with the evolving pedagogies of technical communication, from skills-focused instruction to complex, theory-informed practices shaped by rhetorical, cultural, and social justice turns. It highlights how shifts in technology, workplace needs, and academic theory have influenced what and how we teach, positioning pedagogy as a central, dynamic force in the field. Chapter 1 on *accessibility* by Sushil K. Oswal helps TPC practitioners by offering a framework for an understanding of accessibility beyond compliance. Unpacking evolving definitions of *access* and *accessibility* reveals how design often excludes disabled users when they aren't included from the start of the design process. The afterword, *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Through Citational Practice*, by Kristen R. Moore, Lauren E. Cagle, and Nicole Lowman is a good reminder that technical communication as a field needs to keep practicing DEI even when all DEI efforts are under attack. The authors offer a compelling and critical reflection on the politics of citation and inclusion in shaping disciplinary identity.

The book offers an excellent collection from leading scholars like Steven Katz who wrote chapter 12 on *ethics*. Natasha Jones and Rebecca Walton wrote chapter 32 on *social justice*. Chapter 16 is on *information* by William Hart-Davison. J. Blake Scott wrote chapter 30 on *risk communication*. This collection ultimately reflects diverse perspectives and deep expertise within TPC. I recommend this book to TPC administrators, faculty, and graduate students, as well as technical communication industry professionals.

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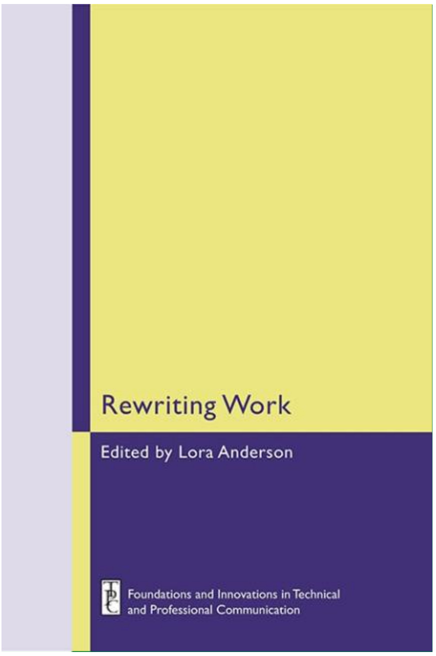

Rewriting Work

Editor: Lora Anderson
Place of Publication: Colorado
Publisher: WAC Clearinghouse
Date of Publication: 2023
Number of Pages: 188

Reviewed by
Douglas Walls
North Carolina State University

Keywords professional and technical writing, rhetorical situations, workplace writing, writing contexts

Lora Anderson's compilation *Rewriting Work* promises to take on "how technical and professional communication has changed over the last two decades," through an examination of place. Much of the complication in the collection is about how we, as a field, conceptualize and operationalize the collapse of "place" in and within technical and professional communications (TPC) research. After Anderson's introduction, Jeremy Rosselot-Merritt and Janel Bloch's first chapter examining definitions of workplace is a thorough look at how "workplace" has been operationalized or theorized in major TPC journals within that time span. In Chapter 2, Lisa Melonçon, the editor for the series the book belongs to, seeks to reestablish local context as an important rhetorical feature in both a geographic sense and in an organizational sense through the coinage of "micro-context," not to be confused with micro-level activity, as a scope of analysis somewhere between "rhetorical ecologies," and "rhetorical situations," for a specific material place. In Chapter 3, Lance Cummings engages in autoethnographic research of an international software development company linking their students' reactions to social/play of spaces at

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the company's offices to *phatic* (a kind of ethos) kinds of communication activity both mediated and not mediated. Specifically, they call for kinds of educational experiences in particular kinds of mediated rhetorical situations.

After Cummings' chapter, the following chapters take the idea of place on more conceptually, placing research methods in narratives and interviews frames. Brian Fitzpatrick and Jessica McCaughey position freelance worker narratives in Chapter 4, one of an illustrator and the other of a commercial director drawing. The authors draw on Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's (1991) concept of discourse communities to examine archived narratives of their two professionals discussing how freelancers navigate identity and authority within and outside organizations that they are hired by rather than are a part of. For Chapter 5, Ann Hill Duin and Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch interviewed 20 members of their program's advisory board over the course of a year and a half, concluding that identity, literacy, and collaboration skills are the most important parts of a technical writer's job. It's important to note here that "identity" stands in for organizational or team roles rather than how most humanists would understand the term while "literacy" stands in for specific technological use. Where literacy occupies something between tool use and social skills and situational rhetorical awareness. With Chapter 6, Mark A. Hannah and Chris Lam propose "a new way of thinking about workplace adaptability" based on reflection and theorization of one of the author's professional experiences. The compilation closes out with Chapter 7 where Kelli Cargile Cook, Bethany Pitchford, and Joni Litsey describe the textual analysis of 176 entry-level variations of "communication" job ads.

TPC practitioners, scholars, and program administrators are aware that workplaces have been disrupted by changes to labor, technology, and large societal shifts in recent years. For the graduate student in technical communication, Rosselot-Merritt and Bloch's chapter provides an excellent sense of grounding of how a term or concept shifts in a field over time. They are quite clear about their methods in selection and analysis. Duin and Breuch's chapter provides a wonderful methods section, robust in detail and worthy as an example of how to describe, refine, and process interview data to make strong claims. And while I might quibble over their conflation of "identity," and "professional role," Duin and Breuch's chapter provides an excellent primer on what technical communicators do on teams and in organizations away from any sort of rigid disciplinary orientation. Their excellent description of their data gathering, refining, and analyzing would be a welcome resource for an instructor looking to tackle these issues in a research methods portion of a class. As a whole, the collection has many competing definitions of place, labor, organizational "culture," and mediation. As a result, the compilation could, structured properly, provide meaningful grist for classroom discussion.

Ultimately, the kinds of workplaces and infrastructures we depend on influence the kinds of professional rhetorical activity we engage in. As I have been finishing up this review, the Society of Technical Communication has announced its cessation of operations, making claims about "what technical communicators do" more uncertain than at other times. Fundamentally, many of the actual questions being asked in *Rewriting Work* are questions about work and labor as much as they are about "place." How to bind and capture what counts as labor and place from an empirical and research standpoint is an interesting, complicated, and expensive kind of question to ask, as the myriad of methodological choices made in this collection show. Many of the chapters seem to have their answer to that question but, unfortunately, also seem insistent on others coming to the same conclusions and assuming the same purposes.

These questions are an example of what should "count," as a workplace in TPC and, at least from a programmatic perspective, what we should be teaching. The kinds of issues approached in the collection are the kind that might be included for an advanced course on place in TPC. That is probably a more interesting question for graduate students than upper division majors, as it could yield interesting methodological and theoretical discussions and options, for example, paired with JoAnne Yates' *Control through Communication* or Beverly Sauer's *The Rhetoric of Risk*.

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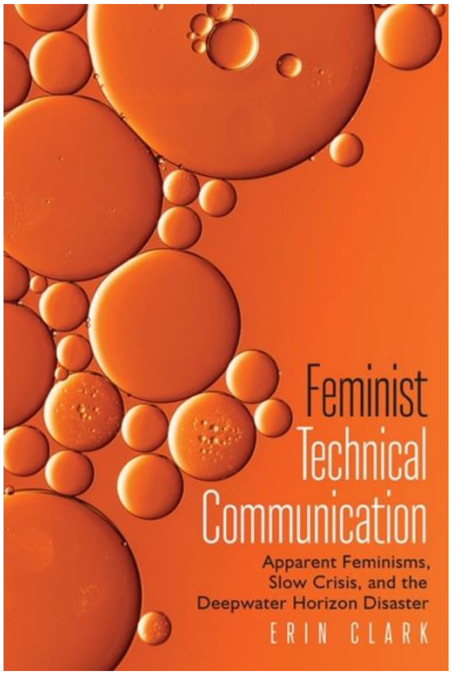

Feminist Technical Communication: Apparent Feminisms, Slow Crisis, and the Deepwater Horizon Disaster

Author: Erin Clark
Place of Publication: Denver, Colorado
Publisher: University Press of Colorado
Date of Publication: 2023

Reviewed by
Kristopher Purzycki
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Keywords apparent feminism, feminism, efficiency, slow crisis, crisis communications

In *Feminist Technical Communication*, Erin Clark applies a framework of apparent feminism to various crisis communications in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon Disaster (DHD). This book argues that traditional approaches to technical communication, particularly those focused on efficiency, are inadequate for responding to complex crises. Clark proposes feminist technical communication as a more ethical framework and, through the establishment of this methodology, amplifies feminist prominence in the field.

Clark structures her work logically, first positioning her scholarship within the discourse of the relatively new field. From a foundation of exhaustive scholarship, she proceeds to define her apparent feminist framework, arguing for its application to an array of situations. While Clark here admits that the applicability of this approach may not be universal, the next chapter demonstrates how it may be best suited for those situations that involve a long tail of effects and impacts, especially on human bodies. In the fourth and fifth chapters, Clark takes an apparent feminist lens to analyze the production, publication, and distribution of numerous documents offering guidance in two regions affected by oil spills left by the DHD. In chapter four, Clark details the case study she undertook, in which she also employs her

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experience as an investigative journalist. Through her apparent feminist approach, the author examines several categories of documents found at various sites and how each addresses the crisis. As Clark emphasizes throughout, each entity behind these publications attempts to communicate efficiently, but nearly all are most efficient at avoiding discussing health impacts on Gulf region residents. This valuation of efficiency, a disciplinary tenet especially important in crisis and health communications, is critical to Clark's apparent feminist framework.

Clark introduces the book by asserting her ultimate goal: to present a work that positions feminist forms of rhetorical analysis as central to the goals of technical communication. More than just another arrow in the quiver, feminist approaches are not only complementary, she argues, but vital to the sustainability of the field. Through the broader recognition of what constitutes efficient communications, feminist criteria for communicators entail an expansion of scope and timeframe. In the case of studying DHD communication efforts, Clark examines publications on mitigating financial and, to a lesser degree, environmental impacts.

In the first chapter, Clark enlists a bevy of critical theorists and scholars to accomplish this task, starting with some of the earliest rhetors, Sappho and Aspasia, building on the work of Cheryl Glenn (p. 13). Clark follows this by citing a more contemporary lineage in Carolyn Rude, Angela M. Haas, and Jay Dolmage. More importantly, however, Clark encourages us to include marginalized voices (such as Nujood Ali and Nakato Juliette) who have used technical communications to advocate for themselves and others. The field is just in being more inclusive but, she argues, we should also be considering the impacts of inclusion when made more apparent (p.15). Cecilia Shelton's *On edge: A Techné of Marginality* (2019) is cited for examples of risk-taking on behalf of these advocates. For the field to thrive, technical communications must continue to wholly embrace "and make apparent the urgent and sometimes hidden exigencies for feminist critique of contemporary politics and technical rhetorics" (p. 31). As part of this endeavor, Clark advocates for those approaches that attend to the slow, the messy, and what is perceived as inefficient.

The second chapter begins with an anecdote (itself a feminist technique unpacked by the author) describing subtle, systemic misogyny and how feminist efforts, through technical communications, might shed light on dominant biases. Apparent feminism, for Clark, is a method that aims to complicate—even negate—the perception of technical communication as neutral (p. 38). Apparent feminist approaches are not merely content with exposing hidden biases but also making essential issues for feminists more visible. This apparency also includes highlighting the value of feminist perspectives, such as the effect of technologies on human bodies, and focusing on diverse audiences as part of the pursuit of short- and long-term efficiencies.

This timeline expansion is central to the third chapter, in which Clark focuses on the slow crisis of events. The author's concept signifies significant events (such as a massive oil spill) whose impacts are revealed over extended periods. This resistance to fast responses contrasts with crisis communications efforts that often warrant immediacy. It is here that Clark eloquently folds in queer theory and the embodiment of crisis as a violent long-tail of oppression. When time becomes unmoored from heteronormative expectations and measurements, one can better recognize alternate moments of significance as well as potential outcomes. This strategy provides Clark with a method for evaluating risk and crisis in terms of multiple temporalities.

With the theoretical frameworks of apparent feminism and slow crisis established, Clark scrutinizes the responses of various parties affected by the DHD in the fourth chapter. Through her in-person investigations of two sites in Alabama, the author discovered that human health impacts were almost entirely ignored by federal agencies as well as BP, the global corporation behind the disaster. Clark curated multiple documents and web pages and their locations to conduct her analysis: federal responses mostly offered standardized bulletins conveying compensation information for citizens; a solicitation for area boat captains to assist in the cleanup from BP; a CDC website was one of the sole items speaking to health but was limited to that of pregnant women and the effects on fetal health (p. 102). Here, Clark demonstrates the disparity between "corporate efficiency" and the more ethical adaptation to accommodate the slow crisis that oil and dispersants have on victims.

The author further distinguishes, in chapter five, between those entities conducting communication efforts. Between these multiple efficiencies, Clark points out, the dominant narrative is generated, shaping how a subject is viewed and discussed. In the case of the DHD, she continues, there were four categories of communications: non-local, local, guerilla media, and transcultural. As Clark reports, various organizations used each of these methods in ways that most supported their priorities. While BP's ostensibly privileged, efficient, immediate communications and the federal response focused on financial compensation, neither elaborated on the long-term effects on health. Local communicators, Clark points out, were more adept at speaking to the slow crisis as it unfolded (e.g., local realtors) but slowly disappeared over time or, in the case of the local clinic, stopped communicating about the disaster altogether. Even guerilla media, once the primary channel for advocacy and activists to respond *in situ*, became exploited by BP.

In the concluding chapter, Clark summarizes the crisis communications efforts surrounding the DHD as the culmination of multiple "extremes of efficiency" (p. 123). An apparent feminist approach, for Clark, is asserting the inefficiency and "messy" process of communicating to humans whose health (as well as financial livelihood) is in distress. The "new efficiency" the author here argues for takes more effort through authentic questioning to address the duration of the slow crisis. Clark's argument—one that many technical communicators may struggle with—is that we might need to set aside pretences of objectivity, neutrality, and efficiency. To accomplish this, Clark concludes, feminist technical communicators must articulate sites where inefficiencies exist as intervention points in dominant, hegemonic, and self-serving systems.

Feminist Technical Communication is a work of scholarship that is dense in detail yet accessible to upper-level undergraduates as well as more established disciplinary scholars, especially those teaching risk and health communications. Although the DHD event occurred over 15 years ago, the disaster offers a clear case for Clark's argument that technical communicators should consider both long-term and immediate efficiencies. Any rhetorical studies curriculum or project will also benefit from Clark's research, further solidifying feminist technical communication.

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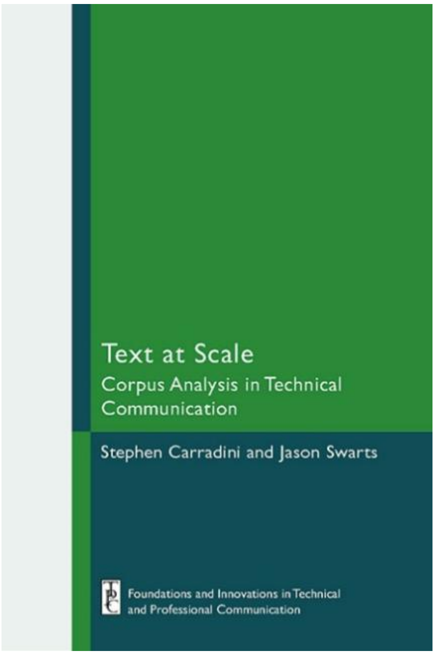
B O O K R E V I E W



Text at Scale: Corpus Analysis in Technical Communication

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Stephen Carradini and Jason Swarts' (2023) *Text at Scale: Corpus Analysis in Technical Communication* presents a practical and comprehensive examination of corpus analysis as a significant method for reflecting on large-scale practice and texts developed by the field of technical communication over time. This large-scale reflection, they posit, is critical to the development of a deeper awareness of the field's disciplinary identity (p. 4). The authors focus their discussion on four key areas of the field: practice, research, pedagogy, and program administration, demonstrating how each area has contributed to the maturation of the field of technical communication through practices and material texts. They further make a case for how texts produced in these four domains can be productively studied through corpus analysis to yield data-driven insights needed for further development in the field. The authors' call for methods of scale in arriving at disciplinary awareness echoes previous calls made by scholars like Benjamin Miller in his 2022 book where he also conducted a corpus analysis of thousands of doctoral dissertations to investigate what they reflect about the identity of writing studies as a discipline. Unlike Miller's work, which does not go in-depth into corpus

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analysis as a method, Carradini and Swarts zero-in on the method itself, discussing its theoretical and practical aspects more broadly.

The authors adopt a balanced approach in their exploration of corpus analytic methods, highlighting both affordances and limitations of the method, while providing strategies to mitigate its challenges. Using numerous research examples in areas like user experience, genre analysis, and theory-building, the authors offer a practice-oriented discussion of corpus analytic techniques and key theoretical assumptions. This approach effectively bridges the gap between the technical concepts of corpus analysis and its practical applications, providing readers with a robust understanding of the method, its functionality, and possible applications in technical communication practice, pedagogy and research.

The book is structured into seven chapters. Chapter 1 establishes a rationale for using corpus analysis in technical communication, providing an overview of the scale of text being produced across the field, and the relevance of large-scale examinations of such texts as the field matures and charts a way forward. Chapter 2 introduces key assumptions, approaches and techniques of corpus analysis, outlining its theoretical underpinnings and procedures for interpreting data. Chapter 3 discusses the types of research questions best addressed by corpus analysis and the role of theoretical frameworks in shaping those questions. Chapter 4 then outlines strategies for building a representative and reasonably sized corpus, with particular attention to ethical concerns. Chapter 5 explores different approaches of analyzing a corpus, including discussions of specific corpus analytic tools like Lancsbox and Antconc, and the types of analysis their features support. Chapter 6 details how to present results obtained from corpus analysis. Here, in keeping with the practical approach applied throughout the book, the authors present an actual report of a corpus analytic project they conducted themselves, providing a model for readers. Finally, Chapter 7 shifts focus from methodological discussion to advocacy, calling for greater institutional and disciplinary support—linguistic, educational, financial, and computational resources—for corpus analytic research in technical communication.

The thorough examination of both the essence and applications of corpus analysis across technical communication practice, research, pedagogy, and program administration makes the book a valuable resource for technical communication practitioners, instructors, researchers, and graduate students alike. However, this review specifically focuses on the pedagogical contributions of the book, particularly in curriculum development and assessment.

In the area of curriculum development, the book answers questions on the kinds of topics to include in a corpus analysis methods course. Each chapter touches on unique corpus topics like assumptions, approaches and techniques of analysis, research question development, theoretical frameworks, construction, analytical approaches, ethical considerations, and sampling, among others. With these topics, instructors could easily create a 15-week course on corpus analysis, something the authors themselves call for (p. 124). In doing this, instructors could draw from the numerous resources and extensive literature referenced in the book. In addition to serving as a good reference material for curriculum content development, *Text at Scale* could also be an assigned reading for the class. The authors' use of both real and hypothetical examples along with the breakdown and step-by step explanations make complex concepts and theories of the method accessible, making the book an excellent addition to a reading list for a methods class.

While the book presents corpus analysis in distinct sections related to technical communication practice and pedagogy, its discussion of the corpus analysis applications in professional practices present similarly relevant curriculum development insights. The authors' discussion of analysis applications in Technical Communication jobs like technical editing, content management, user experience research, among others, grounds the method in practice. This can be particularly helpful to technical communication instructors seeking to situate methodological discussions within specific aspects of the field. For example, an instructor teaching a user experience class will be able to draw on this book to demonstrate how corpus analysis can help uncover patterns in usability test transcripts.

Beyond aiding new curriculum development, *Text at Scale* also provides insight into assessing already existing curricula. Carradini and Swarts provide examples on how to assess the curriculum of courses like first-year writing, as well as the kind of texts to be investigated in the case of such studies. The authors point out how instructors and program administrators, using corpus analysis to study pedagogical materials like course syllabi, and student writing, among others can identify critical patterns and gain insights into how courses are shaping student development. For instance, the authors reference Laura Aull's (2017) study, which analyses argumentative and explanatory writing to identify what rhetorical moves students employ in those writings. A study like this could provide an understanding of how writing genres are being taught, what conventions are being emphasized, and areas needing refinement, ultimately yielding more effective curriculum updates.

Finally, a particularly strong aspect of this book is its consistent discussion of ethical considerations in corpus analysis. Carradini and Swarts raise critical concerns about ethical issues on internet-based research methods like corpus analysis and their tendency to be exclusionary. Beyond addressing ethical issues in the research site, the authors also touch on other important ethical considerations like representation, balance, and access, offering guidelines for dealing with the ethical dilemmas of corpus analysis (p. 73). These ethical considerations, though they are discussed in the context of corpus analysis, pertain to all types of research methods, whether internet-based corpus analysis or not.

Altogether, Carradini and Swarts' *Text at Scale: Corpus Analysis in Technical Communication* delivers on its promise by presenting a tailored discussion of corpus analysis situated in the field of Technical Communication, outlining critical and engaging ways by which the field can capitalize on the method to reflect on its past and chart a way for the future. This book is an invaluable addition to the literature on research methods in technical communication with relevance across all areas of the field and beyond.

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