Report for the UW-Whitewater Assessment Grant: Professional Writing and Publishing

Submitted by Drs. Janine Tobeck, Daniel Baumgardt, and Jessica Lauer, Dept. of Languages & Literatures

For this project, the English–Professional Writing and Publishing program (PWP) undertook a multi-pronged self-assessment. In its ten years of operation, the program has gone through two substantial curricular revisions, working to stabilize a comprehensive core and range of electives that prepare its students to excel and adapt in a broad range of writing- and editing-based careers. However, our learning outcomes have not been updated to keep pace with these changes or to guide us confidently forward in the midst of a rapidly changing academic field. So, with the support of this grant, we consolidated evidence from data about trends in PWP-related program development, direct and indirect assessment of student work, and an extensive alumni survey to better articulate the identity we have built and make informed choices about programming.

Before work on the project began, we lost a member of our initial grant team. During the grant period, we then ran a successful search and brought on a new PWP colleague, Jessica Lauer. As she has just joined us this fall, and as she will be integral to the program developments we project here, we are still in the conversation stage about many of the interpretations presented here. However, they already have shaped and will continue to define our program agenda through this academic year.

I. Resetting our SLOs for curriculum and communication

One of our major objectives for this grant project is to use project data to guide revision of our program’s student learning outcomes, which we know are outdated with respect to our curriculum. The process of negotiating and finalizing changes to our SLOs will help us improve transparency and effectiveness for our students, more accurately describe the program in campus and outreach materials, and set an agenda for next steps in curricular development.

Our current SLOs were solidified in 2012 amidst an overall English program curriculum review, in which it was proposed that all English programs should share a core set of outcomes (and thus a shared core of classes) to be supplemented by specific program-related ones. The outcomes were voted in, but the shared curricular core never solidified, and each English program has since evolved its curriculum distinctly from each other. For PWP in particular, this has resulted in a noticeable imbalance between our published SLOs and the substance of our curriculum. We have admittedly delayed making any changes because this would technically require the other English programs to do the same for departmental consistency and coherence. Through our project, we generated data to support productive SLO revisions and researched potential solutions to the implementation challenge.

This section recaps four approaches to our SLO revision objective:

1) We started with an internal check on our program coherence, studying our current objectives-to-courses map.

2) For a more top-down analysis, to ensure that our SLO revisions are in line with university graduation standards, we also mapped our program-specific SLOs onto LEAP ELOs.
3) To check our SLO and curriculum alignment with evolving disciplinary discussions, we reviewed the structures of regional professional writing- and publishing-related programs (as well as some of the most nationally prominent programs) and published surveys of the field.

4) To test our outcomes on their local responsivity and provide nuanced guidance for our SLO revisions, we asked our alumni to comment on our current SLOs and course structure, relevant skills for PWP-related professions, and target areas for continued development.

The SLO mapping projects helped us characterize the known gaps between our published SLOs and what our actual curriculum emphasizes and delivers. Program comparisons reassured us that, while PWP is locally responsive and somewhat unique in its hybridity, the SLO revisions we are planning for our own alignment are also current with disciplinary discourses. The comparative research also helped highlight some of our most salient communication challenges. Alumni data provided both perception- and description-based assessments of our program’s current curriculum and outcomes emphases, giving us a broad picture of what we are doing well, what we might do better, and what specific adjustments we might make in the short term to our SLOs and curricular offerings.

1. Internal coherence: SLOs and curriculum

Our current SLOs are these:

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<th>All Majors in English</th>
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<td>1. Read closely</td>
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<td>3. Construct arguments</td>
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<td>4. Conduct research</td>
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<td>5. Analyze conventions</td>
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<td>6. Place literary traditions</td>
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<td>7. Demonstrate awareness</td>
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In addition, English Professional Writing and Publishing Majors will emerge from the program with the ability to:

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<th>8. Write and edit documents</th>
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<td>9. Use technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Collaborate effectively</td>
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<td>11. Analyze discourse</td>
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We mapped these through our current curriculum offerings, based on where they are introduced, developed, or officially assessed, as follows (all courses English except where noted):

[I = Introduce; D = Develop; A = Assess]
The three most salient challenges this mapping revealed were these:

### 1.1 Unmappable electives.

Our map is fairly blank for our revolving topics courses (English 366 and 436) and for the internship (493), not because they do not address specific SLOs but because they may hit different ones depending on their topic or structure. For instance, our last three iterations of 366 (discourse analysis, social media writing, and fiction editing) all certainly assessed for SLO 11, but they would have varied in their selection and depth of treatment of any of the others. Also, while we assess student interns on their analysis of the professional discourse into which they entered, we cannot guarantee that the structure or delivery of that experience would consistently meet other particular SLOs. Meanwhile, any given literature course almost certainly makes contact with some of SLOs 1–7, but the array of options students have between survey, analysis, linguistics, writing-intensive, and research courses make it impossible to guarantee that any combination of two courses provides instruction in all of them. The challenge that the literature courses pose for us is developed further below.

Within the PWP-specific electives, we know that the blankness of the map doesn’t signify neglect of our SLOs, as our faculty has been active in collaborating to shape the topics courses to ensure that we are addressing them. However, we are aware that the program’s sustainability and expansion would benefit from a more fully-fleshed record, that new topics-course development might be easier given clearer expectations of SLO coverage, and that advising might be improved by having an easy overview of weaker points in any student’s preparation.

Further, the variable courses do put a bigger strain on our core courses to ensure SLO coverage. In the capstone, for instance, one recent effect was that introducing the new e-portfolio project
into the schedule along with the extensive regular course project felt like a pedagogical compromise, and students’ evaluation comments indicate that they, too, felt too rushed to complete either project to the best of their abilities.

1.2 Disambiguation of terminology.

The structure of our SLOs bears a distinctly “core English” and “additional PWP” breakdown, but those distinctions are less than clear to students given the absence of the shared core English courses initially envisioned. For instance, while the verb headers in SLOs 1–7 do apply to our program, the statements that qualify them focus primarily on what those verbs mean in the context of literary studies. So, for example, while we do teach and assess research skills (SLO 4) in PWP courses, that research most often goes beyond what’s conventionally understood by “scholarly conversation” into internet sources, genre models, industry conversation, etc. That is, we teach scholarly conversation as an aspect of context that is valuable for particular applications, while other types of researched information may be more valid for other applications. Similarly, the mapping process showed us that the boundaries between SLOs 1, 5, and 11 can be imprecise, as, for example, “nuances of language, content, and form” easily apply in a broad sense to PWP material but have very different, more specific valences in literary studies. From a PWP-specific context, then, students might see these SLOs as repetitive, while in our own mapping process, we found ourselves ignoring those literature-specific qualifications of the main verbs. The problem for students is clear; the reason for our internal fudging of the boundaries is addressed next.

1.3 Mischaracterization of skills.

There is a clear imbalance in the ratio of SLOs that refer specifically to literary studies to the number of literature courses in our program (two in the major and none in the minor). This is further complicated by the rising number of students who take English/Film crossover courses for those electives, thus introducing yet another set of SLOs that are not accounted for in our own. But if we simply cut the shared core SLOs from our program SLOs, the four “in addition,” PWP-specific ones would seem inadequate to our curriculum. They do capture—broadly—a good deal of the range of what we want graduating students to be able to do, but their wording tends to emphasize finite skills and products, rather than the critical skills and processes that build a writer or editor’s professional judgment in each of the represented areas. The first seven SLOs come closer to capturing those critical skills and processes, provided we ignore the literary-studies-specific terminology in their elaborations, which is why we still want to say, in some ways, that they are part of what we do.

Removing the defunct shared-core SLOs and creating more nuanced wording for our stand-alone SLOs would help reinforce transparency and scaffolding in our teaching, e.g., where a skill that we verbally introduce in an early-sequence course might otherwise seem too disconnected from the product-based outcome. Rewording could also better capture our program’s emphasis on forming judgment rather than mastering any particular set of conventions—a commitment to developing learning practices that are adaptable and sustainable through context and technology changes, for example.
2. Graduation outcomes: SLOs and university ELOs

For this exercise, we used only our PWP-specific SLOs, as those will form the core of our revisions.

- Write and edit documents to a professional standard in multiple formats
- Use technology employed by professional writers in a variety of media
- Collaborate effectively orally and in writing, individually and within groups
- Analyze discourse used in diverse contexts with attention to audience, purpose, and formal convention

Here, we map them to the university’s baccalaureate learning outcomes (ELOs):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELO/SLO</th>
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<th>9</th>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World:</td>
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<td>1.1: Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences,</td>
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<td>humanities, histories, languages, and the arts</td>
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<td>Intellectual and Practical Skills:</td>
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<td>2.1: Inquiry and analysis</td>
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<td>2.2: Creative and critical thinking</td>
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<td>2.3: Written and oral communication</td>
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<td>2.4: Quantitative literacy</td>
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<td>2.5: Information literacy</td>
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<td>2.6: Teamwork and problem solving</td>
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<td>Personal and Social Responsibility:</td>
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<td>3.1: Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global</td>
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<td>3.2: Intercultural knowledge and competence</td>
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<td>3.3: Ethical reasoning and action</td>
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<td>3.4: Foundations and skills for lifelong learning</td>
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<td>Integrative Learning:</td>
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<td>4.1: Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and</td>
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<td>specialized studies</td>
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This map affirms some of the problems with our SLOs raised by the first map, adding some parameters for additional curricular changes, as follows:

2.1 Uneven distribution.

Though we’re confident that our coursework leads to these outcomes, the mapping process emphasizes, in particular, the weight we’re putting on the wording of SLO #11. That is, while it isn’t a stretch to say that the study of discourse has analytical, critical, rhetorical, and ethical dimensions, and because we introduce and develop each of those dimensions at various points in our curriculum, they might be usefully broken out more specifically for students. Such a breakout would also help us better assess our scaffolding of these skills. We have noted that SLOs 8, 9, and 10, which are more specifically skills-focused in wording, are—even when combined—touching
fewer of the ELOs than the catch-all SLO 11. This again speaks to the challenge we raised above of communicating the balance between developing skills and developing practices that we are actively trying to strike through our curriculum. We turn to this issue more fully in the next section.

2.2 Curricular support.

The gaps in this map reinforce conversations we have already been having about potential curriculum revision/development. First, the absence of an SLO for quantitative literacy is a concern to us, as many of our students pursue technical writing career paths where being able to analyze and communicate data well is critical. We are currently planning updates to our technical writing course (English 372/572) to be more responsive to this need, and our new colleague was hired in part to lead this charge. Second, we have made significant progress in the last several years to regularize civic knowledge and engagement outcomes in our courses (e.g., through the course project in our gateway for all majors and minors and through our grant writing elective, which is currently part of a Community-Based Learning effort and will hopefully earn CBL designation moving forward). However, our touchpoints for developing intercultural knowledge and ethical reasoning are not systematic; they occur where we nest explicit training in rhetoric into our courses—which happens some in all of them, but not in a sustained way in any of them.

We were already aware, and our program comparisons for this project have verified, that the lack of a distinct rhetoric course is our one major structural difference from most other technical and professional writing programs, and we are exploring ways we might address this through our curricular structure. The primary challenges we face in doing so are (a) budgets and staffing across our courses and (b) avoiding additional lock-step requirements in our major/minor plans, as we also need to encourage elective exploration to hone skill transfer abilities.

3. PWP’s place in the ecosystem

Among our motivations is to maintain a unique program identity but also ensure that we are able to participate fully in disciplinary discourse, e.g., on SLOs. To some extent, we are a hybrid program: at any given time, one third to one half of our students enter the program to pursue its publishing angle, specifically seeking editorial careers in literary or trade publishing. However, although we consciously serve this interest, our program’s overall sustainability and growth is underwritten by our broader professional writing and editing approach, which brings us into the scope of more traditional technical and professional communication (TPC) programs. It is primarily that alignment that we used to evaluate our SLOs for this project. Direct and indirect comparative measures reaffirmed both our program’s uniqueness and its responsivity to current discourse, refined our parameters for SLO revision, and gave us additional insight into top communication challenges and priorities.

3.1 Self-portrait: Responsible hybridity and responsive agility

Designed to supplement the existing literature, education, and creative writing programs in Languages and Literatures, our program was formed on the early side of the recession years and officially entered university curriculum in 2009 as a “Professional Writing and Book Publishing” English emphasis. Its curriculum was comprised of literature and creative writing courses and an
existing technical writing course, along with three new courses (English 230, 330, and 430) designed to stage learning in the practices of editing. This program design took a smart approach to UW-System program differentiation and was locally implementable, given that the department had a strong contingent of literature and creative writing faculty who also had linguistics and/or editorial experience. In brief, the program, in its first iteration, was not designed as a traditional TPC program so much as a publishing program that taught skills that are widely applicable in writing and editing fields.

Two issues quickly emerged that precipitated our curriculum changes in 2012 and 2014. First, it made conceptual sense that students interested in entering the literary publishing field—as it was assumed this would be the audience for the program—should be versed in literature and creative writing terminology and practices, while the additional language and editing skills would open a broader field of possible careers to these same students. Course instructors, however, soon became concerned that students weren’t getting enough disciplinary focus in any one of these areas by graduation. Of particular concern to us was a general lack of professional-level command of the language. Second, the various contexts that led more students to our program than anticipated also led to a rapid divide among those who were indeed hoping to pursue publishing careers and those who expected to pursue other avenues of professional writing.

The answer to both of these challenges was to more explicitly embrace our disciplinarity. In 2012, we separated the creative writing courses out of the PWP curriculum—acknowledging that each of these programs demanded staged disciplinary focus—and introduced courses on grammatical and stylistic conventions and practices. We also maintained a course in editorial application, as well as a capstone that centered on publishing but explicitly addressed the transferability of the objectives and skills. The changes we made in 2014 were to introduce more points of contact with specific fields and genres of writing to reinforce that transferability. Now, we confidently serve students whose career interest is publishing and those who pursue more TPC-standard careers, with both a representative set of genre/project-based courses and an editing core that remains deeper than most programs offer and which consciously serves both endeavors.

We note this consciousness pointedly. Because our program faculty has been very small, each PWP student (major or minor) ends up being in 2-4 courses with each of us, and we have been able to constantly discuss patterns we’ve seen in their development. We have thus also always actively collaborated about ways to strengthen transitions between our courses to better help students advance. For instance, we have revised Manuscript Editing (English 330) through several iterations, and redistributed teaching loads to fulfill its best role as a bridge between our editing-focused classes and our project-oriented ones. But to sustain this successful communication as the program grows and as the number of contact points we each have with each student shrinks, we need to develop better guiding materials and make them easily available for reference in course-building and program conversation.

3.2 A comparative challenge

Undergraduate professional writing programs have exploded nationally over the past decade. In their 2013 survey of undergraduate TPC programs in the U.S., for example, Melonçon and Henschel located 185 programs, or a 131% increase over a similar 2005 study. However, there are, as yet, few surveys of the field that confidently or reliably trace its new parameters. There are a number of established, traditional TPC programs, but our program is among many that have
entered the field from less-traditional angles over the past decade, as English and composition/rhetoric programs nationally began to counter declining enrollments with added focus on “practical” or “applied” programming. Given that there were existing TPC-type courses among many of these programs (including ours), and given the comparative research involved in program building, there is certainly some standardization across the field that ties into traditional TPC elements, but also innovations as the whole field itself is moving forward. Thus, some challenges to tracking the field include the varieties in housing of such programs (i.e., their departmental affiliations or stand-alone locations) and the nomenclature they’ve adopted to define themselves, as well as the availability of up-to-date descriptive information about them. A small sampling of titles of programs similar to ours, for instance, includes the more traditional “Technical Communication” or “Technical and Professional Writing” alongside “Rhetoric and Professional Writing,” “Writing Studies,” “Interdisciplinary Writing Program,” and “Writing for New Media,” and some are housed in departments with non-traditional names like “Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies.”

We have been casually tracking regional and national program development for years, but wanted to formalize this research for this project. We found that, even going back over territory we had already mapped, there have been numerous changes. A number of programs have split, for instance, from their English or Communication department homes, added (or subtracted) majors, minors, certificates, and graduate coursework, and, more often than not, substantially updated curricular offerings. A simple website search reveals no consistency in lists of colleges and universities that appear, and there is no single reliable clearinghouse of this information (we queried one to be included, for example, only to discover that they were disbanding). Further, though it has been used to guide some publications in the field, Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) code data is likewise incomplete, as the spread of our curricular matter between multiple viable categories combines with the fact that emphases/programs like ours were never attached to a more specific code than whichever overarching English one a department had adopted.

To achieve our goals for this project, then, we used a combination of individual website research and published research on the field. For the direct program research, to ensure capture of all regional schools, we started from the full US Department of Education list of accredited four-year colleges and universities, and excluded technical schools, seminaries, cosmetology schools, etc. We visited the website for each remaining school in WI and northern Illinois and for some of the top programs in the field nationally. For these schools, we searched major/minor lists (to capture programs outside English or Comm departments), and then recorded program titles, descriptions, and course requirements/offerings.

Having established that our curricular program is both in line with and still unique among programs at comparable schools, we sought guidance for future program development that is attuned to our strengths within the published research we consulted.

### 3.3 Framing SLO goals

When Dr. Jessica Lauer joined our faculty in Fall 2019, she brought with her data from an unpublished study of SLOs in TPC programs nationally. Generalizations from this study suggest that the four most common outcomes center on writing, rhetoric, technology, and design, while other emergent subject areas include research, collaboration, and professionalization. Our existing SLOs address most of these, with the notable absence of specific reference to rhetoric
As introduced above, one of our challenges lies in balancing the representation of product-driven outcomes with analysis- and process-driven ones. Research suggests that conventional TPC programs are evolving toward the latter, not only because of the theoretical research coming out of graduate programs (which are spreading rapidly as well), but because of the critical skills required to negotiate an already broad field with now rapidly changing technologies and terminologies. In the report on their survey of TPC (here PTC) alumni, Blythe, Lauer, and Curran (2014) contextualize these changes thus:

In a response to Wolgemuth’s (2010) inclusion of technical writing as one of the top 50 careers for 2010 compiled by U.S. News & World Report, a person using the pseudonym “Technical Content Manager” wrote in the online comments section:

The notion of a “Technical Writer” seems dated, because maintaining a career in this field now involves blogging, editing, information management, UI=UX design, Usability, QA, training, API documentation, Persona development, etc. And that’s just in the software industry... In other words it is not enough in a Web 2.0 world to ONLY write effectively, you must branch out and be a master of many skills and tools.

That same year, Bernhardt (2010) made a similar comment: “Our graduates are getting jobs, but it is becoming ever more difficult to say just what kind of jobs are out there and what kinds of skills they demand.” For example, the title social media manager did not exist 10 years ago, nor were the requisite skills for such a position on the radars of PTC curriculum. (265)

These examples capture two fronts of curricular challenge for conventional TPC: to prepare graduates with the specific currencies needed to enter the field, and to introduce a responsible swath of these trends while focusing on the higher-order thinking and practices that will help them continue to advance once in the field.

From the professional side, there can be a bias toward currency, emphasizing getting one’s foot in the door. In his blog on technical writing, Tom Johnson (2019) warns would-be students that TPC programs are risky due to “not enough emphasis on technical skills” and “drift from corporate relevance.” When interviewing for lower-level positions, he writes, “much of that knowledge about the theoretical foundations of tech comm that you learned in a tech comm program will be overlooked—not because it isn’t valuable or useful or highly relevant, but because most hiring teams simply lack the awareness about how to assess writing beyond a superficial level.” This concern, he argues, might outweigh the counterargument. “To be fair,” he writes, “higher-level analytical thinking (both encouraged and required in top-tier programs) probably prepares you to climb up the corporate ladder into more strategic and executive levels, where you really need this kind of in-depth rigor to make data-driven, weighty decisions. But it can take years to get to that point.”

Negotiating this particular contest between teaching for entry-level currency and skills for lifelong learning isn’t new to any liberal arts program. However, as our program title includes the word
“professional,” we perhaps face more concrete pressures to prepare our students for direct entry into writing- and publishing-related careers. One advantage we have is a critical history, inherited from traditional TPC research, that has surveyed the professional expectations of TPC employers. Another critical line calls for teaching “layered literacies” as outlined by Kelli Cargile Cook (2002): building curricula to cover basic, rhetorical, social, technological, ethical, and critical frames for technical communication pedagogy to avoid the potential pitfalls of teaching only to the timely. In an effort to merge these two perspectives into an assessment guide for programs like ours, Henschel and Melonçon (2014) compared Cargile Cook’s framework to the “symbolic-analytic worker” Robert Reich defined in his 1992 The Work of Nations, arguing that Reich’s portrait of this figure aligns with a current understanding of what a technical communicator is and does in the workforce. They defined the terms of these two systems thus (7–8):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cargile Cook: Layered Literacies</th>
<th>Reich: Symbolic-Analytic Abilities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>basic</td>
<td>abstraction</td>
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<tr>
<td>The capacity to make informed decisions about usage, grammar, mechanics, styles, and graphic representations based on knowledge of readers and writing situations</td>
<td>The capacity for discovering patterns and meanings</td>
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<td>rhetorical</td>
<td>collaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td>The possession of multifaceted knowledge that allows writers to conceptualize and shape documents whatever their specific purpose or audience</td>
<td>The capacity to collaborate, communicate abstract concepts, and achieve a consensus</td>
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<tr>
<td>social</td>
<td>experimentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ability to collaborate, work within organization settings and handle conflicts</td>
<td>The practice of continuously experimenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>technological</td>
<td>system thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The possession of a working knowledge of technologies (an awareness of which promotes collaboration critique), and the ability to act upon how these technologies are used in the workplace</td>
<td>The ability to see the whole and understand the processes by which parts of reality are linked together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ethical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The possession of and commitment to professional ethical standards, and the ability to consider all stakeholders involved in an information development process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Schreiber and Melonçon then merged the two frameworks into one to capture overlaps, highlighting four concepts—rhetorical proficiency, abstraction, experimentation, and social proficiency—all “linked,” as they say, by critical system thinking (9). Finally, they took a list of common practical skills named in published literature from 2004 to their own 2013 study, and created the following “Conceptual and Practical Outcomes” to guide TPC program assessment (16):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetorical Proficiency</th>
<th>Social Proficiency</th>
<th>System Thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rhetorical/user analysis</td>
<td>collaboration</td>
<td>critical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information design</td>
<td>communication</td>
<td>ethical responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing (genre)</td>
<td>management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>editing</td>
<td>personal traits/work skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstraction</th>
<th>Experimentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>subject matter expertise</td>
<td>basic business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information production</td>
<td>self activation/evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>content management</td>
<td>problem solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>research</td>
<td>technological literacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As these categories align substantially with our own conversations about student skills and needs, and as they include elements that would help us draw clearer connections between our own program outcomes and the university’s ELOs, we will use this structure as a baseline guide for our SLO revisions, combined with the results of our alumni survey, which we address in the next section.

3.4 Additional discussion points

Beyond the SLO pointers we take forward from this section of our project, there were two additional issues framed by our program comparison efforts.

[1] Course array

As mentioned above, the glaring omission from our curriculum of “standard” TPC coursework is a stand-alone course in rhetoric. Meanwhile, while we effectively separated out the initial creative writing courses in our program, we retained two literature electives in our major, on the premise that these would carry some weight in teaching rhetoric, academic research practices, and the complexities of figurative language. We are currently updating our records regarding the courses our students elect to take for a finer picture of how these credits are being used; however, with the addition of the Film Studies program, which cross-lists several courses with the literature program, we have noted a trend in favor of these, which add visual rhetoric/literacy to the list of skills our students might be developing in those electives. Still, as also noted above, these are the least assessible elements of our existing program, and without our current shared English SLOs, we would need to revisit what they mean for our students’ preparation. Because our editing core is a central, staged program component, and in order not to restrict students’ access to our writing and practice-based courses, these two elective spots would appear to be the place in our curriculum where we might substitute one rhetoric course or work with our sister programs to create more PWP-centric literature or film coursework. This will be an object of further discussion as we finalize our SLO revisions.


Two tangential observations emerged from our struggle to trace the parameters of our field, both having to do with available methods for such tracking. First, Melonçon, one of the most active scholars in tracking the field, has not yet identified our program in her current national map of TPC programs. We were also, therefore, not participants in her subsequent surveys on aspects of the field, which seem limited to programs within that initially designated pool. Communication about her tracking methods alerted us to the fact that, along with SLO revisions, we will want to revisit our course titles and course catalog descriptions, monitor the presence of dated paperwork available online, and use our website to establish a clearer and more easily trackable presence.

Second, studying the 2020 CIP code designations—which were used to select programs for one of the field-tracking publications we reviewed—posed an interesting exercise in imagining how we might designate our program now (see Appendix A). However, the multiple possible classifications for programs like ours is of deeper interest in that that system might pose considerable challenges to any data collection and generalization efforts, whether descriptive or prescriptive, about programs in our field.
4. Evidence from the field: alumni input

The occasion of our 10th year of graduating PWP majors and minors provided an opportunity to assess in some detail how our program’s training is serving its alumni. We decided to conduct an extensive survey not only of perceptions of the program, but also—following the lead of publications using surveys to define the evolving career of the technical communicator—of details from working professionals on the kinds of writing and editorial work they are doing.

4.1 Survey design and distribution

We designed a 60-item, IRB-approved Qualtrics survey comprised of four types of questions:

(1) Name and contact information (voluntary) and interest in engaging with the program through mentoring, class speaking, networking, etc.

(2) Educational and work history
   • Majors/minors/graduation year at UW-Whitewater
   • Work history since graduation (work as freelancer/consultant; employment in PWP-related field, employment but not in PWP-related field, graduate or professional training, no employment/not seeking employment)
   • Job titles and employer names

(3) Evaluation of PWP program
   • Satisfaction with preparation, advising, etc.
   • Impression of and comments on current course offerings
   • Impression of and comments on current SLOs (PWP-specific numbers 8-11)

(4) Detailed job information for present and/or past jobs

So that we might be able to compare our alums’ input against national data, we designed our survey to correspond to relevant elements of four published surveys of the field:

• “What Working Life Requires: An Approach to a Technical Communication Competency Model” (Isohella, 2010)
• “A Descriptive Survey of Technical Editors” (Kreth & Bowen, 2017)
• “Analysis of the Skills Called for by Technical Communication Employers in Recruitment Postings” (Lanier, 2009)
• “Professional and Technical Communication in a Web 2.0 World” (Blythe, Lauer, & Curran, 2014)

Although our students don’t just become “technical” communicators, these studies cover general tasks and skills shared across multiple writing/editing/publishing fields. To get the most accurate picture of the field, we encouraged response whether they write or edit for a living substantially or not at all.
We had collected preferred contact email addresses from about 88% of all of our graduated majors and minors after each graduation date from 5/2010 through 12/2018, and a number of alums were also connected on LinkedIn or Facebook. We distributed our survey through Qualtrics to 137 majors, minors, and certificate holders, plus a few who earned no credential but took several courses with us. When we had no preferred address on record, we send the survey invitation to the student’s UW-W email. Addresses that bounced were cross-checked with the social media connections and these alums were sent an anonymous link to the survey. At the end of the survey period, we had received 70 recorded responses, for a 51.2% return rate, although we are not sure how many of the original email addresses were in active use. Given the fact that full responses tended to take respondents between ½ hour and 1 hour to complete, we were highly pleased with this rate.

4.2 Profile of the respondents

[1] Degree and PWP status

Of the 70 respondents, almost ¾ earned a BA while the others earned a BS; 55 were PWP majors, 10 were PWP minors, 1 earned a PWP certificate, and 4 were students who had taken multiple PWP classes but did not earn a credential.

We had responses from each graduation year (May 2010–Dec 2018). Without knowing for certain whether any particular respondent’s coursework was affected by our past curriculum changes, we found it useful to estimate the number of responses based on those program milestones:

- 2010–2011 (combined creative writing/professional writing program) (8)
- 2012–2013 (separation from CW; addition of grammar and style courses) (15)
- 2014–2018 (addition of more writing-specific courses) (47)

[2] Employment/educational history since graduation

We allowed multiple answers to our question about employment history since graduation, as shown in Table A. However, it is notable that 42 of the 70 respondents (60%) have at some point been employed in a specifically PWP-related job. We teach students that what PWP covers will help them write and edit well in any career field, and don’t necessarily expect them all to find jobs with titles dedicated to this specific expertise, so we have been pleased that so many have found positions that are.

Table A. Experience since graduation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Worked as freelancer/consultant</td>
<td>16.54%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Been employed in a writing/editing/publishing/communications job</td>
<td>33.07%</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Been employed but not in one of these primary fields</td>
<td>33.86%</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Attended graduate or professional school or professional training program (e.g., a publishing institute)</td>
<td>11.81%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Been unemployed/not seeking work</td>
<td>4.72%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Field-specific job categories culled from the full list of named job titles included the following:

- Editorial (multiple levels/types): copy editing, website editing, production editing
- Technical writer, scientific writer, proposal writer
- Copy writer, business writer
- Communications specialist, communications team lead/director, etc.
- Report/project/documentation coordinator
- Content specialist, content writer, web writer
- Marketing specialist, marketing coordinator, etc.
- Page layout designer
- Literary agent
- Creative director
- Freelancer (writing and/or editing)

Among these respondents, there were nine earned or in-progress masters or professional degrees in a variety of fields:

- MA in Professional Writing, Carnegie Mellon University
- MA in Publishing & Writing, Emerson College
- MA in English, emphasis on Publishing and Print Culture, U of MN-Duluth
- MA in Library and Information Science, UW-Milwaukee
- MA in Journalism, DePaul University
- MSc in HR Management and Socioeconomic Development, U of Stirling (Scotland)
- MBA, Cardinal Stritch University
- MSE in Professional Development, UW-Whitewater
- JD, UW-Madison

Additionally, five respondents have attended the Denver Publishing Institute, the NYU Publishing Institute, or the Columbia Publishing Institute at Oxford University. These summer institutes are typically 6-week intensive programs that provide some topical instruction in the publishing field, but most pointedly provide opportunities to network extensively with professionals in the field nationally. Historically, most of our alums who have attended one of these institutes do indeed have publishing-related careers.

4.2 Perceptions of the PWP program

We asked several questions designed to gauge perceptions of the program from both personal and professional viewpoints. These included (1) the alum’s overall perception of their own education in the program; (2) their reflection, given what they now know, on our current course structure; and (3) their reflection, given what they now know, on our current SLOs. Results of these questions thus gave us information not only on personal satisfaction with the program, but professional perspectives on our goals and methods, which are in ways quite a bit different from what the program offered to the earlier graduates.

[1] Overall perception of alums’ own experience in/of the program

Table B shows overall favorable reviews of the program from the 58 respondents who answered.
Table B. Overall assessment of PWP training  \((n=58)\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement/Level of agreement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe my major/minor in PWP prepared me to enter the workforce in a related field.</td>
<td>(2) 3.45%</td>
<td>(1) 1.72%</td>
<td>(5) 8.62%</td>
<td>(19) 32.76%</td>
<td>(28) 48.28%</td>
<td>(3) 5.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe my major/minor in PWP prepared me to enter graduate school, professional school, or another professional development program.</td>
<td>(1) 1.72%</td>
<td>(1) 1.72%</td>
<td>(2) 3.45%</td>
<td>(8) 13.79%</td>
<td>(18) 31.03%</td>
<td>(28) 48.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I found my PWP major/minor academically challenging.</td>
<td>(0) 0.00%</td>
<td>(3) 5.17%</td>
<td>(7) 12.07%</td>
<td>(31) 53.45%</td>
<td>(15) 25.86%</td>
<td>(2) 3.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I found the PWP major/minor personally engaging.</td>
<td>(0) 0.00%</td>
<td>(0) 0.00%</td>
<td>(2) 3.45%</td>
<td>(16) 27.59%</td>
<td>(38) 65.52%</td>
<td>(2) 3.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, I was satisfied with the quality of courses in the PWP program.</td>
<td>(1) 1.72%</td>
<td>(1) 1.72%</td>
<td>(2) 3.45%</td>
<td>(22) 37.93%</td>
<td>(31) 53.45%</td>
<td>(1) 1.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, I was satisfied with the quality of advising by my assigned PWP advisor.</td>
<td>(1) 1.72%</td>
<td>(0) 0.00%</td>
<td>(2) 3.45%</td>
<td>(12) 20.69%</td>
<td>(38) 65.52%</td>
<td>(5) 8.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with my choice of PWP as an undergraduate major/minor.</td>
<td>(1) 1.72%</td>
<td>(1) 1.72%</td>
<td>(0) 0.00%</td>
<td>(7) 12.07%</td>
<td>(45) 77.59%</td>
<td>(4) 6.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would recommend the PWP major/minor to others.</td>
<td>(1) 1.72%</td>
<td>(1) 1.72%</td>
<td>(2) 3.45%</td>
<td>(11) 18.97%</td>
<td>(41) 70.69%</td>
<td>(2) 3.45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While coursework and advising structures would have ranged, in some cases considerably, among the respondents, the overall satisfaction rate and likelihood of recommending the program to others suggest that the alums believe on the whole that what they studied in the program was valuable to them personally or professionally or both.

We were particularly interested in the flip-flopping of scores on the “academically challenging” and “personally engaging” prompts (highlighted in purple), with agreement with the former being fairly consistently ranked one step lower than on the latter in individual responses. We were unsure whether to interpret this as indicating (a) a perception that the program is less rigorous than it should be, (b) a perception that program material is not “academic,” or (c) that the phrasing of the prompts suggested negative agreement for “academically challenging” vs. positive agreement for “personally engaging.”

We felt that any weight we might put on any of these possibilities was too important for guesswork, so we followed up by email with two of the more recent alumni who we knew had completed the survey. We asked them (without checking for or telling either of them what they had answered themselves) to surmise reasons for the change in level of agreement. Their responses differed in specifics—one called the writing/project-based courses the most “challenging,” and the other our language/editing courses most “difficult,” and it is clear
that they mean these terms differently—but they both agree in suggesting that the “academically challenging” statement may have been read as suggesting negativity, as opposed to the others. Here are their summary statements:

“I honestly couldn’t tell you how I responded to this question, either, but reading it now, my first instinct is to interpret it somewhat negatively. As in, ‘I found my PWP coursework to be difficult to complete.’”

“To quickly summarize: I did find the curriculum challenging, but I didn’t find it especially difficult. I think that’s why students rated it low, though ‘difficult’ and ‘challenging’ are technically not synonyms. We had a significant amount of time and resources that we could use or call upon to complete each project, which may be why it wasn’t viewed as challenging. I also think the word ‘challenging’ was viewed negatively. If you had said to look at the word in a positive light, that would have likely made me rate it higher.”

Though we will consider the details they offered regarding specific coursework, and perhaps request additional input from others, we feel assured at least by their replies that the survey results suggest no clear concern about a lack of rigor in their training.

[2] Alumni responses regarding current curriculum and SLOs

To see if they would perceive any imbalances or major gaps, we asked respondents, based on their post-graduation experience, to share their thoughts on the current structure of the major and minor, including required courses and electives, and on our current SLOs (PWP-specific nos. 8–11).

We also asked them to assess how well they felt the PWP program prepared them for the skills named in our current SLOs. Table C shows the results.

**Table C. Alumni agreement that SLOs were met**  \( (n=58) \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement/Level of Agreement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to write and edit documents to a professional standard in multiple formats</td>
<td>(0) 0.00%</td>
<td>(0) 0.00%</td>
<td>(4) 6.90%</td>
<td>(24) 41.38%</td>
<td>(30) 51.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to use technology employed by professional writers in a variety of media</td>
<td>(0) 0.00%</td>
<td>(4) 6.90%</td>
<td>(9) 15.52%</td>
<td>(35) 60.34%</td>
<td>(10) 17.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to collaborate effectively orally and in writing, individually and within groups</td>
<td>(0) 0.00%</td>
<td>(1) 1.72%</td>
<td>(7) 12.07%</td>
<td>(26) 44.83%</td>
<td>(24) 41.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to analyze discourse used in diverse contexts with attention to audience, purpose, and formal convention</td>
<td>(0) 0.00%</td>
<td>(1) 1.72%</td>
<td>(5) 8.62%</td>
<td>(23) 39.66%</td>
<td>(29) 50.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, some respondents graduated in the early years of the program, before we had regularly integrated technology of any type in our program (indeed, before we even had computer lab space for most of our classes), and when we had a more diffuse and literary-
centric sense of professionalism. In that light, these results can only be read generally, but suggest that our approach to programming does—whether immediately or over time—set students on paths toward professional success.

The narrative responses to both prompts were very similar, so we categorized the recorded comments thematically and in dialogue with what we took from our SLO mapping and comparative research. Here is a summary of the results:

**Satisfaction with comprehensive practicality:** Most respondents commented on the curriculum and SLOs favorably (with five suggesting they wish they could come back and do the program again now that it has, as one wrote, “matured”). One response suggests that the program structure covers what is perceived to be universally useful material: “I feel as if the current structure allows students to gain the core knowledge they need in the field as well as allowing them to focus on some of the topics they would be more likely to pursue. Also, some of the core topics should prepare them for having to write in a job that may not be primarily in the professional writing field.” In support of that interpretation, several minors felt the program added practical value to their academic career, and that they might on reflection have pursued it as a major. One wrote “I honestly feel I took something away from every class I took for my minor, which is not something I can say for my major,” while another said “I found PWP late in my college career. I would have chosen it as a major if I were to do it all over again.”

As a counter-point to the above, while the majority of responses are in favor of what one called the “diversification” in our curriculum, there were a couple who commented that this no longer seems like a major suited for those interested in publishing. However, most of the specific topics they believed went missing are still covered in the courses, albeit framed more broadly for transferability of the skills and concepts. One lamented that we have eschewed a course focused fully on developmental editing in favor of introducing more marketing skills in the capstone. This was indeed a compromise made for transferability. We have agreed that if we are able to grow the program, we will likely develop tracks wherein the deeper, more specific publishing focus might reappear for those who choose it. It is perhaps worth noting here that, for a substantial portion of our students, there is still a greater pull toward the “creative”-leaning courses among our offerings. But given evolutions in the publishing field itself, we still believe cultivating a broader sensibility about audiences and genres would better suit even those students than a too-narrow focus on conventional or even trending genres and practices in that field.

**Specific suggestions tend to be narrow in focus, depending on the respondent’s personal career trajectory.** Not unexpectedly, a substantial number of suggestions for specific additions are focused on specific document types and technology programs the alums have first encountered in their jobs. These are spread, also predictably, about evenly across the respondents’ job fields themselves: general business, marketing, technical writing, design. We do touch on every specific request named at points throughout our curriculum, to help students understand that being a professional writer or editor doesn’t mean working alone behind a computer, just writing or editing, but also involves quantitative, technological, and social skills, marketing and general business sensibilities, and, often, deeper knowledge of another field, e.g., through a minor. For example, we do teach complex industry-standard
software programs (Microsoft Office and Adobe InDesign) that are specifically named in many job ads, while emphasizing the fact—borne out by multiple alum responses—that many jobs will train employees on other specific programs they require. We also regularly introduce other more limited software (e.g., online project management programs, infographic builders, etc.) in context-specific ways, emphasizing that these will come and go through time, so that developing some fluency in finding and learning programs for a given project is in many ways more worthwhile in the big picture than becoming fluent in specific ones.

We will never have curricular space to cultivate all of the suggested additional skills to proficiency, while other programs on campus exist to do so. Further, investing too heavily in any of them could diminish the varieties of positions our students would feel qualified to pursue (and, likely, our overall pool of students). The fact remains that most of our students enter the program with little to no idea of the breadth of opportunities and positions they might aim for, and most do not have a specific type of writing or editing career in mind (or they change their minds, once they start to see the range of possibilities). Anecdotally, many ask for help with how to explain to family members, etc. that you can “do” more with an English degree than teach. Thus, in terms of curriculum, it seems our most responsible approach to serving the greatest number of majors and minors is to introduce breadth in content, cultivate depth in concepts and practices, and openly teach what transferability means as a skill—an assumption that is supported by the number of different professional fields our alums have, in fact, successfully entered.

We did take particular note of two types of comments: (a) suggestions that certain electives become requirements (specifically, Writing for the Web and Grant/Proposal Writing—namely because they frequently saw these in job ads or note that they perceive that colleagues who are able to do these things are given more responsibility), and (b) requests for intermediate-level courses. These are of most interest to us for possible curricular modifications because they suggest a practical need for a deepening of the field-specific skills that we are already introducing. Obviously, some of this deepening necessarily comes from actually working in the field, and even these requests still tend to give away the career path of the respondent making them, without demonstrated awareness of others. However, as there were numerous requests for deeper technical writing, intermediate style, more design, more social media/web writing, more long-form documentation, and more grant writing, we will actively discuss these as we review our overall curriculum.

Conclusions and action items. Because it is very possible that students might learn about a tangentially-related field from us, but not process what we taught until they find themselves facing it, two courses of reinforcing action would be to (a) highlight relevant university courses, minors, certificates, etc. targeted to specific career sub-paths on our website and (b) address these more actively in advising. We have also been discussing whether we should create an SLO more specifically targeting professionalization (which is right now more implied than explained in SLO #8). A more specific SLO might be useful to help us call additional attention to what we already do in our classes, and why we do it that way. Among the categories suggested by Henschel and Melonçon (2014), this could usefully be imagined as addressing the skills of experimentation.

In addition to where they appear in classes, some of the specifically-requested topics could be addressed in information sessions. Admittedly, because drawing students to extra-
curricular activities can be difficult, this would likely be more effective if we could regularize such events, but our staffing resources are already stretched. Another benefit of having completed the alumni survey, however, is that we were able to build a database of volunteers willing to discuss particular topics with current students. For example, another substantial category of interest indicated in the survey was freelancing. In addition to students who want flexible work options, many of our students know they might more easily break into permanent positions in the field with some portfolio-building experience done alongside a different type of entry-level position. While we would likely not add a full course on freelancing/consultancy, a number of survey respondents who have done this type of work offered to speak on it, so we will pursue this as a first formal informational event (which would likely attract other English majors/minors as well).

Finally, given that resources for additional coursework are sparse, and many of our courses depend on external enrollments (such that it would be difficult to introduce intermediate or advanced programming until we are significantly larger in terms of dedicated majors and minors), one additional step we might take to accommodate these patterns of requests would be to borrow a project from a recent Film Studies program assessment: an assignment audit. In it, the assessment team collected all assignments from all classes and used them to create a second SLO map. This gave a much more nuanced picture of the placement and levels of SLO development and assessment, which was especially important because Film Studies is an interdisciplinary program through which students can also wander quite variably. The results of this mapping were key to developing faculty consensus on useful SLO revisions. This process could easily be as useful to us, not only for SLO considerations but to see where we might build extra/staged points of contact with the skills noted above.

4.3 Descriptive survey questions tied to current SLOs

In addition to perception questions, our survey asked alumni to describe the work they do, to round out opinions that are necessarily derived from a limited range of experience, even among our earliest graduates. This was, in fact, the largest part of our survey, and in adapting questions from other published surveys of professionals in the field, we focused on designing questions related to our current SLOs. That is, we asked about the writing, editing, and design people do; the technologies they use; and their experiences with collaborative processes. Again, we encouraged people to answer these questions even if they were not employed in a writing- or editing-specific job.

Note that, while design/visual literacy is not currently covered by our SLOs, it is significantly represented in our curriculum and is certainly an SLO we will add, as it becomes ever clearer that it is a prominent element of professional writing and editing careers. This is borne out on several fronts: national TPC curricula, prevalence in job ads, and prevalence in our alumni responses.

Our broadest question asked them to estimate the percentage of their job allotted to the following:

- Writing (as official job responsibility)
- Editing (as official job responsibility)
- Writing and/or editing (as part of a different central responsibility)
- Other
The mean reported for writing as an official job responsibility was 28.57%, and for editing as an official job responsibility, 35.37%. Importantly, the 48 respondents who reported time spent writing and/or editing as part of a different central responsibility still estimated a mean of 26.58% of their time spent on these activities. Other studies support the under-recognized fact that even in fields considered more technical or specialized, people spend a significant amount of their weekly work time on writing, at percentages sometimes even higher than this one (see, e.g., Swarts et al., 2018).

The descriptors for “other” were roughly categorizable as follows, with the number of responses falling into each category indicated:

- Visuals/design (11)
- Research/planning/strategy (8)
- Marketing/sales (6)
- Project management (6)
- Event planning/coordination (4)
- Data compilation/coding (4)
- Social media/web/video/press (4)

Eight other miscellaneous answers occurred once.

We were pleased to note that, with the exception of event planning, we do currently connect to each of these categories through course content or course projects. Seeing research appear as often as it did was also informative, as we have been invested in emphasizing this somewhat underrepresented aspect of traditional TPC curricula.

One other significant finding from our broad questions was that there’s a roughly 60%/40% split in the distribution of written or edited work online vs. in print. We would have guessed that the online percentage would have been higher, so, while it is clear that we need to invest time in writing and editing online, we will note that print document design and editing skills are still in demand.

We also asked more specific questions for possible use in assessing particular course content.

[1] Writing material

We asked participants “If you could teach students how to excel at writing one type of material to prepare them for future success, what would it be, and why?” Again, we categorized all given responses, as follows:

- Digital writing: social media, blogs, etc. (13)
- Process documentation/policies/instructional material (7)
- Technical writing, undefined (6)
- No material type (5)
- Email (5)
- Magazine/newsletter articles (4)
- Grants/proposals/executive summaries (3)
- Editorial/reader reports (3)
- Ad copy (1)
There would be some bias here among those who found jobs linked to specific coursework (e.g., technical writing or grant writing), but most of the justifications clarified that they were at least thinking fairly categorically about the skills each type of material requires. So, for example, while marketing and advertising materials were hardly mentioned here, the reasons for teaching especially the digital material tended to mention its general usefulness for marketing. Clarifications on the “email” responses focused on honing concision and being aware of tone/practicing “diplomacy.”

Also notable were the number of responses that pointed away from materials toward judgment and practices. Even among responses naming specific material, there were a number of statements like “this is hard,” and the five responses that openly eschewed naming a kind of material went further to point out that learning by type is neither sufficiently audience-centric nor a strategy for long-term success. As one wrote, “Aside from grammar lessons, I’m not sure this is answerable. I would say what really needs to happen is to teach them to NOT be expecting to be doing one type of writing. Even within this one job, I have to do so many different types of content projects. The writing is different for each one. And all of these are different from writing I’ve done at other jobs. … In terms of incorporating ALL students, my best advice is to make sure they have the skills to be adaptable.”

Whether this signifies that professional life is reflecting the theories by which we approach our teaching of writing, or that our teaching primed students to take a more audience- and process-oriented approach to the work they’ve done, we are pleased that these narrative responses reflect the type of professionalism we aim to develop.

[2] Levels and types of editing

Our editing-focused questions were less exploratory, asking respondents to describe the types of editing they do and what they focus on when they edit. Tables D and E show ranked responses, while other questions gathered narrative examples of how and where editorial skills are used.

Table D. Types of Editing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copyediting and/or proofreading</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading and responding to drafts/copy</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning up coworkers’ drafts</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing web copy</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact-checking/research</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing/acquiring projects</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching editing skills/principles</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental/substantive editing</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with authors to revise mss</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing/production editing</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing/formatting manuscripts</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Again, we are pleased to note that graduates are using skills we introduced, and that we are proportionally emphasizing the most highly used skills.

[3] Design and technology

In support of our emphasis on design and formatting, 39 respondents (59%) said they do print or online design as part of their job, and 11 (16.7%) said they design outside of their job. Multiple narrative comments on multiple questions emphasized the prominence in job expectations, and usefulness in job performance, of familiarity with Adobe InDesign, which we teach explicitly in our capstone course.

Responses to a question about specific software used on the job fell in line with expectation: Microsoft Word, Powerpoint, and Excel and Adobe InDesign and Photoshop are—along with email—the most often cited. Other Adobe programs, Trello and Slack, and unspecified web editing and content management programs form a lesser but still notable secondary group. Some of these—especially the project management ones—could be built into our curriculum more regularly, at least to familiarize students with how they can be used.

Despite the number of calls for increased technology training in the program, narrative responses to this question generally indicate less vehemence about specific programs, with most noting that it would be “helpful” to have learned more of a given program’s functions, and many indicating that they were trained on the job for programs they didn’t know. A few mentioned collaborative writing programs like Google docs, which many of our students use by default but which we have to emphasize have limitations in certain professional settings.


One of our existing SLOs indicates the importance of teamwork/collaboration, but we will likely move toward a formulation that emphasizes the distribution of processes in an overall collaborative communication/publication effort. When asked to estimate the percentage of their work done largely independently and percentage done in collaboration with others, there was again a nearly 60/40 split, although we didn’t ask them to define what they
understood as comprising one or the other. Nevertheless, collaboration is a fact of professional life in the field, and cannot be left out of our learning objectives.

Narrative comments taken from elsewhere in the survey provide some nuanced information about key concepts in collaboration. For example:

“One thing that I know stressed a lot while I was in the program was that writing/editing isn’t just sitting behind a desk not talking to anyone. It isn’t an solitary career. I think that more course work that involves getting students out of their comfort zones and talking to other people (that probably aren’t their classmates) would be invaluable.”

“One of the best & worst parts of my job is that I get to work with a wide variety of different people & personalities every day. By learning how to be able to manage these interactions to ensure a positive outcome, or in some cases lessen the unhappiness, has been crucial.”

“Production Editorial is all about details and often you are working alone on a manuscript or going through covers, but everything goes through multiple departments so you have to be able to work with other people and communicate well to keep projects moving.”

“I don’t think I would have a job if I wasn’t able to be a team player. Since I work in marketing, our entire department works as separate cogs that make up a large machine.”

“A class/projects where a class breaks up into groups and each group handles a different stage in a project. Rarely do I actually undertake an entire project without communicating directly with other associates. For example, one team could determine the scope and direction of the project, one team could develop the initial draft, one team could handle the review, style editing, and approval.”

These examples reflect internalization of several program talking points, as well as an important spectrum of awareness of the role of collaboration skills in (1) basic social professionalism and (2) the division and coordination of complex tasks. In our formulation of an SLO for collaborative work, we will want to capture this range.

4.4 Descriptive survey results tied to conceptual outcomes

Other questions in our survey stepped away from the product-oriented, specific subject matter of our discipline to gauge which “soft skills” are considered valuable and why. These are obviously harder to frame in learning outcomes, or to develop viable assessments for. But even though the scores and comments we received from survey respondents on the questions outlined above show that our alums generally think of even the concrete skills we teach in broader social and functional terms, we are aiming to communicate both curricular and pedagogical goals in our SLOs, with the distinction being akin to the difference between what and why.

Two important questions we asked in this vein focused on expertise and adaptability. One trait we work on with students (which we know is not unique to us) is proactivity: figuring out what you need to know, then figuring out how to figure that out. We find that a large number of our
students have difficulty adjusting their learning behaviors from K12 pedagogical styles (geared toward mastery and re-performance of learned material) to our styles, which require diligent study but also judgments about strategies and applications in more ambiguous contexts. One manifestation of this issue came, in the early years of the program, in the form of end-of-semester evaluations submitted by internship supervisors. Common comments on the strengths of the interns coming from our program included that they followed instructions well, were earnest and dedicated, had a good sense of the language, etc. Common suggestions for improvement centered on time management and communication (e.g., knowing when to ask questions), but these are to be expected from inexperienced and unconfident young professionals. More concerning were the number of comments related to interns waiting to be told what to do instead of moving projects forward, or needing too much supervision.

Given the fast-paced nature of most writing and editing jobs, and the fact that for every fairly defined position in an established organization, there is another expansive position where one is virtually the only employee in charge of multiple types of communications, we started more consciously building verbal bridges between our more objectives-focused coursework (like grammar and style) and multi-stage project courses where you are neither given complete information nor shown a model end-product.

Since this is still a challenge for us, and since there is (trained) resistance to the ideas that one must be skilled at both detail and abstraction, as well as at negotiating broad contexts and moving forward without clear instructions, the questions we asked about expertise and adaptability were on one level simply designed to gather proof that what we have been saying is true. Again, the numerical data are generally supportive, but the commentary adds important nuances.

In response to a prompt asking which informal title the respondent would claim—Subject-matter expert or Interdisciplinary guru—37% respondents chose the former and 63% the latter. This prompt did not offer them a chance to say “both,” but a trend in the narrative comments was to claim that intersection, as in this example: “You have to know about many things that are not writing related to be successful as a technical writer, but it’s important to remember and to convey to coworkers that when it comes to communication, you are a subject matter expert. So it’s about both establishing yourself as the expert on writing, but also being knowledgeable about the field you are in (e.g., knowing some programming if you are working in software.” Even among respondents who claimed highly specific job responsibilities, most wanted to emphasize their “many hats,” as one put it.

We got similar results from a question asking about the relative rigidity of the respondent’s work (which also implied instruction-following vs. independence in practice). This time, we gave them an explicit in-between option, with the results shown in Table F.

Table F. Responses to “Which Best Describes the Nature of Your Work?” (n=61)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There are established procedures</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have to make it up as I go</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s a bit of both</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Worth noting here is that a number of “established procedures” responses were from alumni in non-PWP related jobs. Within the field, procedural rigidity is to be expected
especially in entry-level jobs and jobs at larger communications-based organizations where writing, editing, and design roles are well defined, so the smaller number of free-form positions in relation to that is not surprising. However, the fact that nearly 2/3 of the respondents claimed a hybrid is important. Moreover, nearly every narrative response that specified established procedures included a “but” or “however” comment. Repeated words included “creativity,” “adaptability,” “situational,” “dynamic,” and “responsive.”

These two sets of results run counter to some of the stereotypes our students come armed with about grammar experts solitarily wielding red pens. They invite us to consider whether our students would benefit from an SLO that explicitly addresses abilities to abstract from content knowledge into complex communication situations (as well as lend support to the potential of a collaboration outcome).

One more informative result came in response to a valuation prompt on a list of 33 “soft” skills, like “being flexible” and “ability to compromise.” Respondents were asked to rate each as “Unimportant or somewhat important,” “Important,” or “Crucial.” Given the enthusiasm with which the pool of respondents used the “Crucial” button, it is perhaps enough to say that the only categories for which the mean response fell below “Important” were these:

- Having a large vocabulary
- Having a passion for words
- Having a heightened aesthetic sense, and
- Ability to focus on one task at a time.

As these descriptors also tend to be stereotypically tied to the persona of an editor, this result suggests a fairly rounded usurpation of students’ conventional expectations between program entry and career path.

In narrative responses to the follow-up prompt (“Would you care to share one or more experiences that made you aware of something you marked ‘crucial’ above?), the clear winners were “ability to multi-task” and “ability to prioritize,” with interesting runners-up being variations on “flexibility” and the abilities to give and to take criticism.

We will need to discuss the specifics of this set of responses in relation to the conceptual and practical outcomes categories suggested by Schreiber and Melonçon (2018). But the survey response that most completely captures thematic trends that emerged from the set comes from the prompt to suggest additions to our existing SLOs:

“These are not all required for all fields, but they are the most important skills in my mind. - Attention to detail - a command of grammar rules - strong research skills - self-teaching (especially with technologies) - complex problem solving - an understanding of the structure of rhetoric and how to effectively use it (i.e., marketing) - an understanding of themes and thematic arcs and how to identify them - an ability to give constructive criticism that is received well - an ability to effectively evaluate thematic and structural problems within a text's plot/narrative arc - project management - interpersonal communication (written and verbal) - ability to follow, but lead when necessary - an ability to increase efficiency”
II. Assessing student work

The other major component of our grant project was the direct assessment of current student work, to gather more nuanced information on in-progress learning. This section recaps three approaches we took:

1) Analysis of longitudinal data we have collected on a standardized grammar test,

2) Evaluation of student writing completed as part of a summer assessment project for Languages and Literatures’ English programs, and

3) Piloting an e-portfolio unit in our capstone course, English 430, during the spring semesters of 2018 and 2019.

The Professional Writing and Publishing program addresses the shared English program learning outcome to “write effectively [that is, to] produce clear and coherent prose demonstrating effective use of grammar and style” (SLO 2) through a three-course sequence: English 362: The Grammar of Standard Written English; English 364: Style: Principles and Practices; and English 330, Manuscript Editing.

“Effective use of grammar” involves the following ability:

Writers must solve for basic issues of correctness in standard written English.

Basic issues are ones in which authoritative guides agree on a single correct form for all occasions. This ability is focused on in English 362 and English 330. It is worth noting that there is more to “effective use of grammar,” at least as editing professionals approach grammar, than solving basic issues of correctness. Editing professionals must also navigate usage issues, more dynamically rhetorical issues in which authoritative guides do not agree on a single correct form for all occasions.

In Section 1, we discuss in detail how we assessed learning of grammar. We focus only on students’ ability to identify and solve for basic issues of correctness, with the idea that, down the road, we will likely wish to assess ability to navigate usage issues. We administered different versions of a standardized test across three courses in a trajectory towards degree completion. As students neared completion, they increased in knowledge of grammar; considerably fewer students displayed poor knowledge of grammar, while considerably more students displayed excellent knowledge. Students especially gained in the correct use of modifiers, irregular verbs, parallelism, and punctuation marks. With the exception of irregular verb forms, these problems tend to involve an ability to “see” the major structural components of a sentence, an ability that is a focus of 362 and 330. By the end of the course sequence, students did not struggle greatly with any one category of error. The problems they continued to score lower at (<70%) varied from those that all but the most expert writers consistently struggle with to, somewhat inexplicably, some routine interventions. Nevertheless, there was still considerable room for improvement, as the average for the class at the end of the course sequence was 84%, and we would like to see the average at 90% or higher. A couple interventions to 362 emerged: (1) more clearly separate basic from usage issues, and (2) do so by teaching usage through the topic of pronoun-antecedent agreement.

“Effective use of style” involves the following ability:

Writers must write clearly and coherently.

In English 364, students learn highly specific criteria to address clarity and coherence in prose.
In Section 2, we discuss in detail how we assessed student learning of style. We scored students’ prose style in assignments across three courses in a trajectory towards degree completion. Most students took 364 between the first and second course that we assessed. We found that students improved from around fair prose stylists to good prose stylists, a considerable improvement given the nature of the scoring mechanism. Further, we found that students wrote more clearly than coherently, while they did not appear to perform differently across criteria within each of these categories. We suggest that the lower scores in coherence may be due to students experiencing difficulty applying principles of coherence to documents with different generic constraints and affordances than were taught in 364. In general, the assignments we scored tended to be briefer and more heavily sectioned than most documents in 364. A couple of interventions to 364 emerged: (1) teach coherence through a greater variety of documents, and (2) teach in document coherence in addition to paragraph coherence. An additional intervention emerged to courses students typically take after 364: (1) work to circle back to principles taught in 364 in order to draw through-lines from course to course and emphasize major skills we want students to develop.

Our analyses of grammar and style support the conclusion that our explicit instruction in grammar in 362 and 330 and style in 364 makes a clear and positive difference in our students’ ability to write effectively. At the same time, our analyses suggest room for growth, pointing to a number of distinct ways we can help our students write more effectively than they currently do.

In Section 3, we detail the piloting of an e-portfolio project in our capstone course. This was not a direct assessment of student work on program SLOs; it was only assessed in the context of the course grade. Our objective is to make the e-portfolio a graduation requirement and to establish it as a primary source for sustainable program evaluation. The initial runs allowed us to shape a combined formative and summative portfolio structure that will provide us with rich program assessment material while serving students as initial professional portfolios. Student evaluations collected after the trial runs suggest that the capstone course is not an ideal place for the portfolio project, as it competed with other course content for their best efforts. We will, therefore, need to pursue alternative delivery structures and establish concrete plans for conducting sustainable assessment using the portfolio results.

1. Assessing grammar: Solving for basic issues of correctness

1.1 Nature of the correctness test, versions I and II

We administered two different versions (V1 and V2) of a standardized test on grammar from a grammar handbook, Diana Hacker’s *Rules for Writers*. While the exact questions differ from V1 to V2, the tests are identical in every other way. Each has a certain number of questions that probe awareness of specific categories of error. The following is a breakdown of the categories of error and number of test questions devoted to each in V1 and V2:

- Parallelism (3)
- Mixed constructions (3)
- Misplaced and dangling modifiers (4)
- Shifts (3)
- Sentence fragments (5)
- Run-on sentences (5)
- Subject-verb agreement (6)
- Pronoun-antecedent agreement (4)
1.2 Grammar testing sequence

The test was administered in the following sequence:

[1] V1: English 230, Foundations of Writing and Editing

English 230 is the gateway course to the major. Since 2012, nearly all students in 230 have taken Version I, which is proposed to students as a way for them to self-assess their editing competency and general knowledge of grammar. Students’ test scores had no effect upon their grade for the course.

[2] V1: English 430, Publication Development

Version I of the test was administered in two different sections of this capstone class. Nearly all of these students would have already taken English 362 and English 364 before enrolling in 430. We told the students that we introduced this test into 430 to evaluate student learning. Students’ test scores had no effect upon their grade for the course.


In one semester, Spring 2018, we had students take Version II. We told the students that we introduced the test into 330 to evaluate student learning. Students’ test scores had no effect upon their grade for the course. Notably, in Spring 2018, 12 students took version I at the beginning of the semester in 430, and they took version II at the very end of the semester in 330. Thus, for those 12 students, we have a gauge of how much knowledge of basic issues in correctness students acquired within one fifteen-week semester during which they took a course (330) that significantly focused on grammar and copyediting.

1.3 Invalid questions

When scoring the tests, we threw out 5 of the 60 questions as invalid.

Reviewing the 330 scores, we noticed that students frequently answered incorrectly questions pertaining to pronoun-antecedent agreement. 5 of the 7 questions with the lowest percentage correct centered on this grammatical issue, and one question, question 20, students answered correctly only 9% of the time.
This test item well illustrates the confusion students experienced:

Four people saw the accident, but not one of them said they would be a witness for me in court. **No error.**

The test taker is instructed to choose whether A, B, or C is an error or if the answer is D, no error. According to the test, the correct answer is B; they is an error because it is a plural pronoun, while its antecedent is singular. Similarly, the they in question 35 was categorized as incorrect:

*Often a child likes to be read to because they get the reader’s full attention.* **No error.**

Question 35 was answered correctly at a rate of only 30%. The problem with these questions is that the status of singular they is not like other basic issues of correctness. Singular they is a usage issue. Its use is not recommended by most style guides, which tend to be conservative, but it is also nevertheless fairly common in print and now authorized by outlets such as the Washington Post to refer to individuals in a gender-neutral way. While it is possible, for example, to reword question 35 so that it isn’t necessary to use a pronoun at all, some students may have decided they was acceptable because, without being able to significantly reword the sentence, there was no viable gender-neutral singular variant. With these questions, there are no truly straightforward remedies. In short, some students got these questions wrong not because they failed to track agreement but because they perceived the sentences in a more nuanced way than was evidenced in the original question design.

1.4 Limitations to testing sequence

Before discussing results, it is worthwhile to discuss the limits to what this method can tell us. First, a comparison of V1 230 and V1 430 scores is, of course, not a direct measure of the amount of learning about correctness students gained from English 362. English 362 is one of a number of courses the students took across a considerable time span, and students gained other experiences within student organizations and internships. Second, it is also a limitation that students took the same test version, V1, going from 230 to 430—although, after a span of nearly two years, most if not all students would have forgotten specific test questions and answers. Third, while a stronger case could be made that the Spring 2018 V1 430 and V2 330 sequence more directly measures learning in 330, only twelve students took this test sequence, and the overall number of students presented in the table is far too small to make sweeping generalizations.

1.5 Results

[1] There was an overall increase in knowledge of correctness.

Table G presents the scores for students who took V1 in 230 and then went on to take V1 in 430, V2 in 330, or both:
It is encouraging to see an increase in scores from 230 to 430 and an even greater jump in knowledge for 330 students at the end of Spring 2018—given the structuring of the course sequence, we would really expect the biggest payoff in understanding of correctness at the completion of 330.

[2] There was a considerable decrease in poor scores and increase in excellent scores

It is difficult to describe precisely how significant the overall 11% increase in knowledge is from the beginning of 230 to the end of 330. Out of 82 test-taking, the absolute lowest score was 45%, suggesting that many students found a certain number of the test questions to be fairly easy.

To corroborate this idea, we surveyed 4 semesters of 230 students’ answers to specific test questions, finding that 15 of the 60 test questions were answered correctly 90% of the time or higher; conversely, there were only two questions answered correctly 10% of the time or lower. With the easier questions out of the way, the 11% higher scores from 230 to 330 represents some hard-earned knowledge.

However, more clearly than Table G, Figure A tells the story of student improvement from 230 to 330:

Table G. Student Scores from Beginning (230) to End (330) of Course Sequence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>230</th>
<th>430</th>
<th>330</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>79</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>86</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
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<td>Student 11</td>
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<td>Student 33</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>62</td>
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<td>Student 34</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 35</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These splits show that 31% of students coming into the course sequence scored poorly—a 70% or lower; in comparison, 13% of students exiting the sequence scored poorly, and from first to last course, the absolute lowest score improves 15 percentage points, from 45% to 60%. On the other side of the split, about 5% of students coming into the sequence scored excellently—a 90% or higher; in comparison, a full 33% of students exiting the sequence earned such scores.

What the course sequence and other experiences did was nearly eliminate students exhibiting truly troubling gaps in knowledge on correctness while, at the same time, greatly increasing the number of students with impressive knowledge of the basics of correctness.

[3] **Students most improved considerably in use of modifiers, irregular verbs, parallelism, and punctuation marks.**

Table H presents a list of the questions in which students’ scores increased from 230 to 330 by 10% or more. The question numbers themselves have been removed, but the category of error that was tested remains.
This increase was factored in the following way: For each test question, we derived the average score across four sections of 230; we derived the average score across the one section of 330; and we subtracted the 230 from the 330 question scores.

Table H shows that students improved considerably in, among other things, solving for correct modifiers, irregular verbs, and parallelism. While it doesn’t show the sharpest increases, use of commas stands also out as significant due to how many problems show improvement, five in all. Counting the “colon (misuse of)” category, there are 7 questions that show significant improvement in punctuation.

Also notable is that many of these errors involve perceiving the major structural components of a sentence: dangling modifiers, parallelism, run-on sentences, some uses of the comma, and colons. As this ability to “see” the sentence is a major focus on 362 to 330, there seems to be a payoff in ability for many students at the end of the course sequence.

[4] Students did not end up struggling greatly with any one category of error.

In 330, each of the 7 questions that students got correct at less than 70% illustrated a different category of error. These errors are listed in Table I.
We can categorize this list into unsurprising versus surprising problems. The unsurprising problems are as follows: forms for lay and lie; use of whoever/whomever; scope for a modifying adverb; and parallelism in complex lists. They are unsurprising because students and writers find them to be notoriously difficult. Some forms of the verbs lay and lie overlap. The only real remedy is committing to memory the six forms for each verb. Many writers routinely forget what they memorized because it is not a distinction that arises frequently enough. To assess whether to use the nominative whoever or objective whomever, writers must understand the overall grammatical pattern of the sentence to determine case—a higher-order skill. Finally, writers most likely find challenging the modifying adverb and parallelism errors because they are less salient than others.1

Interestingly, while the whoever and whomever and parallelism questions made this list of least percent correct, they simultaneously made the list in Table I of questions most improved upon from 230 to 330. Despite this trend, and the fact that 330 students scored considerably better on other irregular verbs, they scored considerably worse than the 230 students on the lay and lie question. This is something to investigate in further classes.

The surprising problems were possessive apostrophe, comma in between two independent clauses, and use of colon. These problems are comparatively not as stubborn, and each was focused on in 362, 330, or both. The questions involving the comma in between two independent clauses and the use of the colon are additionally surprising in light of how well students generally improved with punctuation. The possessive apostrophe is most surprising of all because while the use of comma and colon often require a correct analysis of the overall sentence structure, the possessive apostrophe involves a less complex analysis. Additionally perplexing is that 330 students scored significantly worse on the possessive apostrophe question than 230 students.

1.6 Conclusions

Despite the encouraging trend illustrated by the splits, the question still remains as to how we could get all or nearly all of the students to be highly proficient—how we could get the mean at the end of the course sequence from 84% up to 90% or higher. Two interventions readily come to mind:

1 Consider the parallelism problem in Marian Anderson said that life had taught her to obey her own rules, to forget past injustices, to sing her very best, and the importance of acting, in which the importance of acting is problematic because it is not parallel with the other items in the list that are infinitival clauses (to obey, to forget, to sing). Compare this error with the following less subtle subject-verb agreement error: Social scientists thinks that they have found a direct correlation between television watching and violent behavior, not only among children but also among adults.
[1] In 362, try to more clearly separate basic from usage issues.

It is worth reiterating that what these tests do not assess well are usage issues, ones in which there is no one fix. We speculate that some of the lower 430 scores may signal a natural period of growth in which students experience cognitive confusion as they grapple with the idea that not all grammatical problems have a single straightforward solution or are, for that matter, “problems” in all contexts. These are lessons students learn in English 362, Grammar of Standard Written English, which nearly all take between 230 and 430.

This period of cognitive confusion is one explanation for the performance of Students 5, 20, 21, and 22. These students’ scores drop considerably between 230 and 430, on average by about 9 points, only to sharply increase between 430 and 330, on average by 15 points. Students 23 and 31 show similar drops between 230 and 430. While we have no scores for these students in 330, they likely would have similarly performed better, as there are no instances of students performing worse in 430 than 230 but not improving from 430 to 330.

To be clear, we posit that, albeit counterintuitively, the grammar course might be the reason for the lower scores of some students between 230 and 430. The course encourages these students to question the solidity of their understanding of correctness by discussing more sophisticated usage issues; some students don’t have enough discernment to distinguish between basic and usage issues, and they consequently (temporarily) lose ground on basic issues of correctness. These students have something in common: none start out displaying a high level of skill. The average score of these students in 230 is 68%, 5% lower than the average 230 score. None of these students score any higher than just slightly above the average. These students especially might benefit from instructions and exercises focused on distinguishing between basic and usage issues. While they do show a marked increase from 430 to 330, their overall net increase of 6% is considerably less than the average increase of 11%.

[2] In 362 and 330, spend extra time focusing on pronouns.

As we noted, a number of questions involving pronouns were considered invalid because they did not unambiguously deal with basic issues of correctness, which is what we tried to assess. However, pronouns might be a fruitful area to increase focus on for two reasons. First, some instances of pronoun-antecedent agreement are basic issues of correctness. Problems involving such instances could be contrasted with other questions involving usage issues, such as those (discussed above) that involve singular they. Second, pronoun usage is also a topic many students are interested in or concerned with, including the issue of including third-person gender-neutral pronouns. Possibly, a 3-page paper could be introduced into 362 or 330 to encourage students to work through these distinctions.


We tested for basic issues of correctness because they are vital for our students to learn but also because we had no test readily available that assessed students’ ability to navigate usage issues. We believe that a carefully designed test could assess this ability, but standardized test on grammar almost invariably revolve around basic issues and lack nuance. The ability to navigate usage issues is an important focus in our course sequence, especially in 362 and 330, and we would do well to track how well students are learning these lessons as a way to understand their overall grasp of grammar.
2. Assessing style: Writing clearly and coherently

In English 364: Style: Principles and Practices, students study specific criteria for clarity and coherence in prose. This course also sits between our gateway and capstone courses, such that almost all students in the program will have taken it before the capstone. It thus offered us both (a) means for developing a very specific rubric for this assessment, and (b) a reliable structure for measuring student growth between the gateway and capstone courses, English 230: Foundations of Professional Writing and Editing and English 430: Publication Development, respectively. For reasons we explain below, we also compared the scores in 230 with another course near the end of the major trajectory, English 435, Grant/Proposal Writing.

2.1 Style scoring rubric

We built our scoring rubric according to criteria explicitly taught in English 364. See Figure B.

**Figure B. Scoring Rubric for Style Assessment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clarity</th>
<th>Coherence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In a situationally-appropriate way, the writer...</td>
<td>In a situationally-appropriate way, the writer...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>makes subjects characters and verbs key actions these characters perform</td>
<td>creates a consistent set of topics, with no jarring transitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uses reporting verbs &amp; phrases to distinguish authorial from non-authorial voices</td>
<td>provides introductory sentences that summarize paragraph content and themes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We weighted each category and elements within each category according to their relative importance in contributing to effective style. The maximum possible scores were 4 for clarity and 5 for coherence. The slight difference is due to the increased importance of coherence over clarity across different rhetorical situations.

2.2 Scoring texts

We scored the following texts:

- Assignment from English 230, Foundations of Professional Writing and Editing (n=13)
- Assignment from English 430, Publication Development (n=22)
- Assignment from English 435, Grant/Proposal Writing (n=12)
To establish inter-rater reliability, we first read and discussed the 5 submissions from English 230 students who were not PWP majors or minors. We then scored the rest of the submissions from English 230 and English 430 independently.

We ran into an unanticipated challenge, however, with our English 430 texts. While we had reasoned that it made good sense to include texts from this class because it is PWP's universally-subscribed capstone, as we scored, we concluded that English 430 does not include pieces of prose that are extended enough to well demonstrate style issues. The English 430 assignment we examined was comparatively informal and designed to test higher-order objectives. Style was not included as an explicit criterion of judgment.

To bolster our findings, we scored an assignment from English 435: Grant/Proposal Writing that explicitly included style principles among its grading criteria and that mirrored the proposal assignment we were using from English 230, thus allowing for a more accurate measure of growth through the program. For 11 of our initial 22 students from English 430, we had a second document to judge on the criteria of clarity and coherence.

2.3 Results

[1] There was strong inter-rater reliability.

In Table J, we list the overall scores according to course, style category, and scorer (where JT and DB are different scorers).

Table J. Overall Scores for Style

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>JT Clarity</th>
<th>JT Coherence</th>
<th>DB Clarity</th>
<th>DB Coherence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>230</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>430</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>435</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table J shows strong agreement between scores across courses and categories. The difference in scores between JT and DB are as follows: .46, .02, .05 in clarity, where 4 is the highest possible score, and .04, .21, and .11 in coherence, where 5 is the highest possible score. These scores are very tightly grouped, with the possible exception of .46 difference on clarity in 230. Further discussion of the clarity criteria helped us be more on the same page as we scored 435 and 430. However, we feel the 230 clarity numbers nevertheless capture a general trend in that the higher number of 2.58 is still lower than the lowest 435 clarity number of 2.68.

[2] Students improved their style across the course sequence.

Table K presents the overall style scores across courses.
Table K. Composite Overall Style Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>230</td>
<td>5.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>430</td>
<td>6.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>435</td>
<td>7.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These scores are out of a possible 9 points. We might more meaningfully understand these scores if we convert them back to a 4-point scale, as in Table L.

Table L. Composite Overall Style Scores Converted to 4-Point Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>230</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>430</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>435</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On this 4-point scale, 1 is poor, 2 is fair, 3 is good, and 4 is excellent. According to these numbers, students in 230 are a bit closer to fair in than to good. In 430, they progress to be a closer to good but still remain between fair and good. In 435, they make a considerable jump and score between good and excellent—but closer to good than excellent.

In our opinion, the jump between 230 and 435 of .72 point is encouraging for two reasons. First, students dealt with more complex subject matter in 435, and so it would be more difficult for them to maintain good prose style. Second, our scoring system makes truly large jumps difficult by compressing scores between extremes of “poor” and “excellent.” On a 4-point scale, the lowest possible score is 1, and given the nature of the task—writing—perfect scores of 4 would be highly unlikely. No student received such a score. Even scores very close to 4 were not likely, as borne out by the breakdown in Figure C.

Figure C. All Scores Across 230, 430, and 435 (4-Point Scale)

Figure C shows that the very lowest scores are clumped at slightly less than 2. On the other hand, all but 4 out 44 scores were fell at or below 3.33, making the average score of 3.15 for 435 a substantial improvement.

[3] Students were weaker at coherence.

Table M presents the composite scores for each category.
Table M. Performance on Clarity versus Coherence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Clarity</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Coherence</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>230</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>430</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>435</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since the maximum possible score for clarity (4) differs from the maximum possible score for coherence (5), the composite scores were converted to percentages that could serve as better points of comparison.

While 364 affords roughly equal time for discussing clarity and coherence, we suspect that the lower scores for coherence might have to do with the principles of coherence we teach being more difficult to adapt to different types of documents. This is because the generic constraints and affordances of a document are less likely to influence execution of principles of clarity than they are for coherence. While in 364, we tend to focus on medium-to longer-sized documents containing stretches of prose, students in the courses we scored were creating smaller and more heavily sectioned documents. They may have experienced difficulty applying the principles of coherence to one smaller stretch of text after another.

On a related note, 364 focuses on paragraph coherence—coherence within each paragraph that is created by the careful structuring of sentences within it. 364 does not focus on document coherence, which is created by through the careful arrangement within a document to create global coherence. However, our examination for coherence suggests that the interaction between paragraph and global coherence might be explored in class.

[4] Students did not seem to perform differently across criteria within each category.

We use “seem” here quite pointedly because data on individual criteria was lost for the 430 and 435 papers. However, our impression is that the breakdown we do have for 230 holds also for 330 and 430, as we recall remarking upon this after finishing our scoring. For 230, students performed 2% better on the “makes subjects characters and verbs actions” criterion than on the “uses reporting verbs” criterion; they performed 1% better on “provides introductory sentence” criterion than on the “creates consistent topics” criterion.

2.4 Conclusions

[1] In 364, teach coherence through a greater variety of documents.

We pointed out that students seemed to struggle applying principles of (paragraph) coherence to shorter, more heavily sectioned documents. We could introduce a variety of genres to give them practice at applying principles to different types of documents.

[2] In 364, keep focus on paragraph coherence but also cover document coherence.

The sorts of texts that the students were constructing are by no means uncommon. As we scored them, these texts highlighted the importance of document coherence. Students should receive some instruction in this challenge, not only because it is important in its own
right but because there is interaction between the two types of coherence: increased document coherence encourages better paragraph coherence, and vice versa.

[3] Work to draw through-lines from one course to another.

Our sense is that some students in 430 and 435 may have performed better if we consistently pointed them back to the stylistic principles they learned in 364 as they crafted their prose. At present, the scoring criteria for both courses’ projects include a section on style, but it is not assessed in detail. Doing so is not easy for two reasons. First, the principles of style involve some level of expertise that is not shared by someone who does not teach the subject matter. Fortunately, the assessment of style itself has served as enough of an education for a non-expert in the subject matter to be able to draw these lines. Second, taking the time to come back to skills learned in other courses takes time away from learning new skills in the present course. This is a real concern. The field that we’re are preparing students to enter is diffuse and multifaceted, and we need to teach a broad range of skills. However, the discussion of stylistic principles highlights the importance of circling back at the very least to some of the most important skills—like clarity and coherence—and we have begun to think about how to do this.

3. Introducing the e-portfolio

The e-portfolio component of our project is a work in progress.

We have experimented with portfolio projects since the early years of the program. Initially including one in the gateway course (English 230) proved problematic, as, while we saw it as an opportunity for longitudinal formative awareness, students who were later asked in English 430 to substantially revise their earlier creations were disinclined to do so. Instead, they submitted virtually the same material along with additional texts created in later coursework, assuming that the work they had done in the early iteration was the same as would be expected at the entry point to a career, or that somehow the growth between would be obvious to an observer. This was in spite of efforts to include reflective exercises. Because of the relative onerousness of the project, and the anxiety students can feel upon graduation, we did not attribute a large component of the (summative) grade to this project at that point, which may have contributed to the lack of rigor with which they approached it. Even more problematic during this era, when a colleague introduced the idea of a “portfolio piece” in an intermediate-level course, students vocalized that they “had already done their portfolios.”

Thus, as a component of this grant project, and after a sufficiently long moratorium on the gateway portfolio, we decided to introduce the e-portfolio again, this time only at the capstone level. The first iteration was during the capstone course, English 430, in Spring 2018.

From the start, there were two competing impulses: while we recognize the potential of the e-portfolio to help us create a sustainable program assessment model, we also recognize that in our discipline, rapid growth and the imperative to separate ourselves from “traditional” English and communication programs has led to a near-standard expectation that graduates will have professional e-portfolios to bring to the job market. In our first iteration of the portfolio unit for this project, we attempted to negotiate these two things through instruction—i.e., while the assigned portfolio was to perform the functions of a summative, professional portfolio, there
were associated reflective exercises included alongside the project (and in the grade) where students were to address the more formative element of the reasoning behind their selections.

A second problem was that, as a component of this grant project, we hurried that assignment into the course, thus readjusting an existing syllabus to fit in the additional project. In order to avoid disrupting the course too much, it was imagined solely as a baseline run—we did not have enough time to teach it sufficiently to expect a highly crafted output, so we used the opportunity to try out different approaches to its introduction, to see what students would most respond to.

In Spring 2018, then, what we asked for was a fairly rapid creation of a web portfolio (using Wix, Weebly, or Wordpress, assuming that using a WYSIWYG platform was enough of a test to master, but something they should have been able to do, given past instruction on design and programs). They were given a set of materials to reflect on: LEAP ELOs, PWP SLOs, and their own transcript, and there was a lesson designed to guide them to navigate these to create a “story” of their education for their introductory site pages. They were then asked to select three artifacts from their coursework, revise them to professional standard, and upload them to the portfolio with brief statements contextualizing what they were and what skills they represented/how they spoke to the student’s particular strengths. We also studied and discussed model portfolios. In principle, students in the capstone should be able to work from this collection of sources and entry points to create a document to professional standard that serves its identified purpose and would appeal to its assumed audience.

Because it was rushed, and because it was low-stakes, the results would have been disappointing from the view of an official assessment of cumulative student work. Informal, anonymous student evaluations at the end of the term reflected anxiety that they knew they should have done these better, but felt too rushed to give them the time they deserved. Because this was a bit out of character for these students (who are more apt to complain that we belabor some instruction too much), we guessed that they were to some extent projecting anxieties about their readiness for career entry. Here, as an example that supported that guess, is an unidentified alum’s survey comment. By process of elimination by survey dates, this respondent would have been in the Spring 2018 iteration of the capstone:

“I wish the capstone would be a year long. We covered so much in that class that by the end of it when we were learning about how to market our projects I was completely burnt out. Not to mention contending with other classes, capstones, trying to graduate, and trying to find jobs it just was too much and I missed out on taking the time to actually really focus on learning that skill and applying it because I really struggled with trying to market my projects during job interviews.”

In the Spring 2019 iteration of the capstone, then, we made several adjustments. First, the project was given a more extended stretch of the course, though still at the end. The second adjustment was a guided assignment on finding and evaluating models. This was useful because it was difficult to find instructional materials on e-portfolios that were not overly formative (coming primarily out of educational contexts) or overly summative (coming out of professional contexts). While training them away from reliance on instructions is a goal of this project, it still requires attentive discussion about how to negotiate and adapt semi-relevant information into concrete strategies for a “real” assignment. Ultimately, we addressed the pros and cons of both approaches to the portfolio concept and introduced and discussed a third option that is becoming more standard in the field of user experience design. In these portfolios, many of the
portfolio owner’s claims to professionalism are accompanied by explicit demonstrations of how they tackled a complex challenge—what they tried, what failed and why, what worked and why, and a show of the final product. In brief, it is a perfect combination of formative and summative work. In their process descriptions, these professionals are conveying their attentiveness to user/audience needs, their responsivity to the challenges to convention those needs pose, etc., as well as communicating who they are as professionals beyond how their professional products look. These are the kinds of things we were aiming for through the “reflective” statements required in the first iteration of the project, only in this instance, they are also part of the professional package.

Along with this fortuitous discovery came an alum contact and a link to her portfolio that followed these principles, and that she agreed I could share. Giving our students models that seem reasonably close to their own level is crucial: overly professional portfolios can too easily turn out to be not aspirational, but intimidating. Our alum—a working professional in a PWP-related job but who is trying to expand into a UX career—provided a smart, relatable, and inspirational (because home-grown) model.

To take an additional step toward designing a portfolio structure that we might use for programmatic assessment, we dictated the range of artifacts that had to be included. There were obvious course assignments to fit each of them, though there were also allowances for any student who hadn’t completed one of those courses, or who wanted to try, for instance, to include their additional identity as a creative writer as part of their portfolio, etc.

With these more substantial anchoring pieces, and more sufficient time for exploration, discussion, and completion of this project, we assumed the results would be superior. However, students in this course fell behind on the main course project (there were some class cancelations for weather early in the semester that had required some hurried adjustments), and they asked for an extension on that. It was granted, as the project for this course tends to become a centerpiece for student interviews and examples, even without a portfolio. So, at the end of the semester, the informal evaluations again reflected anxiety that the portfolio unit was too rushed. Worse, because it was more substantial and more substantially weighted, they felt it detracted from their performance on the main project as well.

While acknowledging that there are still adjustments that could be made to planning—e.g, this coming spring, we will introduce the portfolio early in the semester and try to tie congruent stages of both projects together—this experiment has not only been an anxious one for the students. The capstone course covers a great deal of conceptual and content territory, and entails assessment of virtually all of our SLOs. It involves a forced (though supported) shift from performance of content to self-generated standards, a guided process of abstraction and increased self-reliance. It is, in short, not the ideal place to try to situate another major and impactful endeavor.

It has become clear through these two iterations that a better way to capitalize on the pedagogical, assessment, and professional potentials of a portfolio project, we will need to pursue a different structural option for delivery. At present, we are thinking of adding a 1-credit exit course, and we will actively explore the possibility for this among our current curricular and SLO revision conversations. Until we are able to make such shifts, however, we will continue trying to refine the project within the space it has in the capstone course.
Works consulted


Appendix A: CIP codes (2020 version)


Items in red indicate categories or parts of categories addressed in our curriculum.

09) Communication, journalism, and related programs.

09.09 Public Relations, Advertising, and Applied Communication

09.0908 Technical and Scientific Communication

**Definition:** A program that focuses on the communication of technical and scientific knowledge to a variety of audiences through print, video, and digital media; and that prepares individuals to function as technical writers and editors, documentation developers, web designers, and usability specialists. Includes instruction in scientific and technical writing and editing, graphic and information design, web design, audience analysis, document usability and field testing, publications management, and applications to specific technical fields.

09.0909 Communication Management and Strategic Communication

**Definition:** A program that focuses on the critical thinking, analysis, and practical skills essential to developing and implementing communication strategies that advance organizations goals and missions. Includes instruction in communication management, crisis communication, communications law, digital and traditional marketing strategies, media relations, social media strategies, strategic communication, traditional and emerging media, and writing for the media.

09.10 Publishing

09.1001 Publishing

**Definition:** A program that focuses on the process of managing the creation, publication, and distribution of print and electronic books and other text products and prepares individuals to manage the editorial, technical, and business aspects of publishing operations. Includes instruction in product planning and design, editing, author relations, business and copyright law, publishing industry operations, contracting and purchasing, product marketing, electronic publishing and commerce, history of publishing, and professional standards and ethics.

10) Communications technologies/technicians and support services.

10.03 Graphic Communications

10.0303 Prepress/Desktop Publishing and Digital Imaging Design

**Definition:** A program that prepares individuals to apply technical knowledge and skills to the layout, design and typographic arrangement of printed and/or electronic graphic and textual products. Includes instruction in printing and lithographic equipment and operations, computer hardware and software, digital imaging, print preparation, page layout and design, desktop publishing, and applicable principles of graphic design and web page design.
23) English language and literature/letters.

23.13 Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies

23.1301 Writing, General
Definition: A program that focuses on writing for applied and liberal arts purposes. Includes instruction in writing and document design in multiple genres, modes, and media; writing technologies; research, evaluation, and use of information; editing and publishing; theories and processes of composing; rhetorical theories, traditions, and analysis; communication across audiences, contexts, and cultures; and practical applications for professional, technical, organizational, academic, and public settings.

23.1303 Professional, Technical, Business, and Scientific Writing
Definition: A program that focuses on professional, technical, business, and scientific writing; and that prepares individuals for academic positions or for professional careers as writers, editors, researchers, and related careers in business, government, non-profits, and the professions. Includes instruction in theories of rhetoric, writing, and digital literacy; document design, production, and management; visual rhetoric and multimedia composition; documentation development; usability testing; web writing; and publishing in print and electronic media.

52) Business, management, marketing, and related support services.

52.05 Business/Corporate Communications

52.0501 Business/Corporate Communications, General
Definition: A program that prepares individuals to function in an organization as a composer, editor, and proofreader of business or business-related communications.

52.0502 Grantsmanship
Definition: A program that prepares individuals to develop and write grant proposals to support an organization or cause. Includes instruction in identifying grant opportunities, developing an effective proposal, budget justifications, and developing a working relationship with the funder.