

Graduate Degree Program Assessment Progress Report Cover Sheet:

Degree: M.A. in Professional and Technical Writing
For Calendar Year: 2009

Date submitted to college committee: 3/1/2010
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Overall Rating:

Respond to all six parts following the “Degree Program Assessment Progress Report Instructions.” (NOTE: Parts 1 through 4 can be copied from the relevant sections of your assessment plan.) Attach additional pages as needed.

(1) Student learning goal(s) addressed this year:

Students who successfully complete the MA in Professional and Technical Writing will be able to

1. Use writing to develop critical thinking and reading abilities
 2. Understand, address, and control writing processes, including the multiple techniques involved in prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing
 3. Produce readable, organized, and well-edited written products that conform to discourse conventions appropriate to a wide variety of academic and work situations
 4. Understand the historical development and importance of the disciplines of rhetoric and writing
 5. Use digital technologies to communicate effectively with a wide range of audiences, and adapt to the dynamic rhetorical situations created by those technologies
 6. Collaborate effectively with other writers
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(2) Learning outcomes/objectives for those goals addressed this year:

Objective 1: The MA portfolio shows that the student can write various types of documents that reflect the range of the PTW program.

Objective 2: The MA portfolio shows that the student is aware of his/her audience(s)

Objective 3: The MA portfolio shows that the student can design documents; the MA portfolio shows that the student can organize ideas in a document; the MA portfolio shows that the student can conduct research and cite sources; the MA portfolio shows that the student can edit for grammar and mechanics.

Objective 4: The reflective cover piece demonstrates that the student has general knowledge of various theoretical perspectives in the field of rhetoric and writing.

Objective 5: The portfolio shows that the student can produce documents using digital technologies.

(3) Courses & activities where assessed:

Our learning objectives are assessed through the evaluation of portfolios constructed by our MA students in RHET 8300. Students in RHET 8300 have completed all of their core coursework, along with most of their concentration and cognate courses in the program. Usually these students need only to take one more course and complete their thesis in order to graduate.

(4) Methods used:

Three graduate faculty members serve as evaluators for each year's portfolios (usually the graduate coordinator plus two others). The portfolios are assessed holistically; each reviewer prepares comments evaluating the extent to which the portfolios did or did not reflect the program's learning goals and outcomes. Evaluators also summarize their impressions of what the portfolios reveal about the program's greatest strengths, its weaknesses, and areas for future program development. This year we evaluated 23 portfolios.

Once the assessment is complete, the results of the portfolio evaluations are shared with the Graduate Committee, which makes decisions about how to revise the program based on the assessment findings. Assessment team members are also asked to comment on the assessment process as a whole.

(5) What are the assessment findings? How did you analyze them?

This year we implemented a change that we discussed in last year's report: we dramatically altered the structure of our portfolios, and we retired the portfolio rubric that we had been using since the late 1990s to evaluate the portfolios. The new portfolios are entirely web-based, reflecting a new emphasis on advanced digital literacy for all students in our program, not just the students who plan to become technical writers. The paper-based portfolios of previous years were designed entirely based on the old rubric categories: students were given a ten-item rubric and instructed to create a portfolio that satisfied (to the best of each student's ability) each rubric criterion. The web-based portfolios are more open-ended: students are asked to create a portfolio that will tell us what kind of writer, editor, or teacher they have become as a result of their work in our program, and they are required to use and cite samples of their own writing as evidence for their argument.

We believed that this change would improve our ability to evaluate several of our learning goals. In particular, we hoped to better evaluate our students' ability to construct a coherent professional identity for themselves using a combination of their own writing and web technologies. We wanted to see whether they could build and sustain an argument over an entire portfolio, rather than making it a collage of random-seeming selections based on criteria we had imposed. We also wanted to give them the opportunity to tell us things about how the program worked or did not work for them beyond the scope of the learning outcomes we had described for them.

At the same time, we had some reservations about the new approach. If we no longer required students to incorporate theoretical citations in their cover pieces, as the original rubric had, would

theoretical awareness disappear from the portfolios? If we gave students more freedom in selecting which writing samples to include, would we still see students demonstrating a wide range of writing skills, or would students choose to show us only pieces from a single comfortable genre? Would the portfolios be sufficiently analytical, or would they become overly sentimental reflections on each student's "personal journey?" Would the creative nonfiction students appear at a disadvantage in this web-based format, given that they do not always have the same level of technological experience as the tech writing students? Would we still get useful assessment results if we stopped using our primarily quantitative rating process?

When this year's evaluators met as a group to discuss their impressions of both the portfolios themselves and the new portfolio process, the consensus was that the change has been a success. Few if any of the concerns we had about how our students might respond to the additional freedom were borne out in the portfolios they produced, and although this group of students had never been exposed to the formal learning outcomes described in the old rubric, they succeeded in demonstrating those outcomes nonetheless—sometimes *more* effectively than they had when we were more prescriptive about the portfolio's structure.

For example, **demonstrated knowledge of rhetorical theory** was one of the lower-rated categories in our assessment reports for the past two years, a fact that was of increasing concern to our Graduate Committee. We speculated that maybe one reason students were scoring below our expectations in the category was that the old rubric asked us to evaluate their theoretical fluency only in the cover letter, where their attempts to incorporate theoretical citations were often awkward at best. The difficulty of the theory courses is a common complaint among students—so we worried that if we no longer required theory in the cover letter, and did not specify that they must include a theory piece in the portfolio, theory might disappear from the portfolios entirely. Our worry turned out to be needless: nearly every portfolio in the 23 we examined not only included a theoretical piece, but often included more than one. The students generally demonstrated impressive theoretical fluency both in the sample papers and in the ways they categorized their professional development. We will be watching to see if this pattern continues in future years.

This year's portfolios also reveal substantial growth in our students' **visual and technological literacy**. This is the first year of which we can say that *every* student graduating in this portfolio cohort can write and post web content on the internet, publish documents in multiple electronic formats, and integrate images with their texts. In addition, we were pleased to see that **collaborative writing** (a learning goal we highly value, but one that had previously been difficult to measure) was highly visible in this set of portfolios. Students included far more collaborative writing samples than in past years, and they discussed in their reflective pieces how conversations with other students and professors influenced their work all the way through the program. The reflective pieces show that students are developing a consciousness of how to collaborate effectively.

Finally, our concerns about students possibly demonstrating a narrower **range of writing ability** also proved to be unfounded. Although we didn't tell students they had to include a specific number of different genres, almost every portfolio included a diverse range of documents written for a diverse **range of audiences**—and this too was reflected in the students' cover pieces. Many of them spoke eloquently about how challenging it was to categorize "what type of writer, teacher, or editor" they had become, and so as a result, they came up with multiple nuanced categories to describe themselves. The students expressed confidence in their ability to adapt to new genres and new rhetorical situations based on what they had learned from their coursework, and their confidence appears to be well-grounded. These results suggest that our diverse curriculum and faculty interests are among our program's greatest strengths.

Having said this, the portfolios did show that we still have some room to grow. **Proofreading and editing skills**, one of the lower-rated categories in last year's report, are still a nagging concern this

year. The problem is more evident in the writing samples students have chosen than it is in the cover pieces they write to frame their samples, so this year's evaluators suspect that our students may not be in the habit of leaving themselves enough time to proofread before they turn their papers in (and then they don't correct those papers before using them in the portfolio). Our program may need greater emphasis on high-quality professional presentation in student work, since these problems can substantially damage a writer's credibility. And while our students' technological and visual literacy has greatly improved, our first batch of all-web portfolios shows that **more design training** may be needed to help our students produce professional-looking, usable, and accessible online texts.

(6) What conclusions were drawn and what decisions were made as a result? How were stakeholder groups involved?

Overall, the evaluators concluded that the MA program in Professional and Technical Writing is working well to help students achieve the program's learning goals, and this year the portfolio process has been improved to make some aspects of that learning more visible than in the past.

However, we are always looking for ways to strengthen the program still further, and this year is no exception. In addition to drawing on the portfolios themselves, we are in constant dialogue with our students during the RHET 8300 course, during advising, and through informal focus groups so that we get their perspective on their learning experience. Student comments are encouraging us to continue thinking about how we handle portfolio assessment and what those portfolios do for the students, not just for the department.

By allowing students more freedom to use the portfolios to construct and argue for their identities as writers, teachers, and editors, we have responded to one of their past complaints about the assessment process. Previously, some students commented that they felt the portfolios were mere busywork: a set of papers compiled to meet artificial criteria for purely bureaucratic purposes. Because the students now have more control over what the portfolios say and what they contain—and because the portfolios are in a web format that can be used for a wider variety of purposes—students are more invested in the process and feel that they get more out of it. But they are still frustrated by the fact that they spend a lot of time and effort making these portfolios, yet never receive any feedback about the quality of their finished product. We have explained that the primary purpose of the portfolios is for us to assess the program, not individual students: a true but not especially satisfactory answer, for them or for us.

Because of this feedback, as well as the results of the assessment itself and other observations made by our Graduate Committee members, we will probably continue to tweak these portfolios so that they eventually become something students can use in their professional lives as well as in our assessment process. We are also in the process of adding a non-thesis option to our MA program, and as we revise the program to incorporate that option, we plan to foreground the creation and building of the portfolios from the very beginning of our students' experience, rather than waiting until RHET 8300, when they are nearly finished. For example, we anticipate that all students will be required to take a 1-hour seminar course introducing them to the program's learning objectives and portfolio-oriented culture. In addition, each student will be assigned a "portfolio mentor" upon entering the program, and the student will be required to meet with his or her mentor at least once per semester to discuss his or her developing collection of writing samples. Students who choose the non-thesis option will take six more hours of coursework than students who select the thesis option (which may allow more room for the editing and design courses we and our students both feel they need), and the non-thesis option will culminate in a portfolio defense, enabling students to receive feedback about their portfolio work in an appropriate setting.