

Profile of Professional Writing at Michigan State University

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Abstract. This article provides an institutional context and a program history for the Professional Writing undergraduate major at Michigan State University. A program profile, disciplinary strengths, faculty overview, and assessment issues are described.

Key Words. communication modalities; computer labs and facilities; critical, rhetorical, and technological literacies; professional writing; digital and technical writing; writing in communities and cultures; writing, editing, and publishing

The most important thing the PW curriculum has given me, beyond the technical and rhetorical lessons, is the vocabulary I developed that allows me to discuss my reasoning behind design choices in a clear and logical way.

Tyler Smeltekop, 2008 Professional Writing graduate

Professional writers can efficiently communicate both on-screen and in print through writing, design, and style, and have the ability to thoughtfully support their decisions and methods through clear and concise interpretations and explanations.

Marissa Hayes, 2008 Professional Writing graduate

The understanding that every audience has unique concerns and requires different methods to be efficiently communicated with are immensely important in today's postmodern global culture.

Ben Rubinstein, 2008 Professional Writing graduate

Michigan State University has a long history of an institutional commitment to writing with both first-year writing requirements and upper-level, in-the-disciplines writing requirements. Rather than survey MSU's long commitment to writing here, however, we focus on two institutional initiatives that, in part, set the stage for MSU's undergraduate program in Professional Writing.

Program History

Institutional Context

In 2004, then-Provost Lou Anna K. Simon launched a "Realizing the Vision" initiative with the goal of inviting key stakeholders to imagine the future of the liberal arts and sciences at Michigan State University. One of the task forces convened was a Writing Task Force, which produced a final report on enhancing MSU's writerly environment and fostering a writing-centered University.¹

In 2005, University President Lou Anna K. Simon launched a "Boldness by Design" initiative, and task forces were established to address key issues. In its final report, the Enhancing the Student Experience Task Force noted that advanced communication skills (both in writing and in speaking) were an absolutely crucial twenty-first century ability.

Later in the document, the task force recommended to the university community a broader and more expansive definition of literacy and offered a definition of writing as including "multimodal composing and [the] construction of messages that include (individually and in combination) all communication modalities (written, oral, visual, and temporal texts), many of which require familiarity and fluency with digital technologies."²

Program Overview

The Professional Writing undergraduate program at Michigan State University was developed during 2001–2003, launched in fall 2003, and matured in tandem with the Realizing the Vision and Boldness by Design initiatives, both of which heavily emphasized the importance of communication skills.

The Professional Writing program was initially developed to meet the then-Provost's desire to further enhance writing at the university. The English Department was invited to develop the program in initial discussions, but chose to instead continue its focus on literature, creative writing, and

¹ See https://www.msu.edu/~acadgov/documents/WTF_FinalReport2004.pdf.

² See http://boldnessbydesign.msu.edu/documents/BbDImpervative1_002.pdf.

film studies. At the time, first-year composition was offered in a long-in-existence, free-standing program (the department of American Thought and Language, primarily populated by faculty with PhDs in American Studies and History). The department serviced the university in providing courses to fulfill the its “Tier I” writing requirement—a four-credit-hour first-year composition course. American Thought and Language became the home for the imagined undergraduate writing program—an ideal, given the unit’s commitment to writing and emphasis on first-year composition. Soon the department’s name changed to Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures (WRAC), and a curriculum was developed and piloted, which we describe later, mapping its disciplinary articulations, and identifying program foci that lend shape to the undergraduate major.

Professional Writing is not a writing-across-the-curriculum or writing-in-the-disciplines endeavor; rather, it is a writing-*as*-curriculum degree program housed in MSU’s College of Arts & Letters, geared toward students interested in specializing in writing as an area of expertise. The major helps students develop advanced writing skills with emphasis on writing in digital environments; on writing for/in diverse disciplines, communities, and cultures; and on editing and publishing. The major prepares students for careers in technical writing, information development, Web authoring, grant and proposal writing, publications management, and editing and publishing.

Within the degree program, in their internship experiences, and through co-curricular experiences, Professional Writing students develop skills and sophistication in the following areas:

- Understanding how different contexts—related, for instance, to delivery mode, document type and genre, audience, and purpose—shape a writing-related task;
- Writing to and for various audiences—cultural, professional, organizational—in effective and persuasive ways;
- Writing creatively, with panache and flair; informatively, with clarity, conciseness, and comprehensibility; persuasively, with detail, description, and supporting evidence;
- Conveying complex information in informative, understandable ways with both words and images;
- Editing across project types and levels of edit (e.g., peer review, content editing, copyediting);
- Mapping, coordinating, and managing large-scale projects; and

- Exploring and mastering software to produce a range of documents.

The Professional Writing program engages students in exploring, experimenting with, and enjoying forms of communication, different types of technologies, and the ability to interact and work with other students, faculty, and business and community mentors in internships and collaborative projects. The program is designed to be flexible to accommodate changes in approaches to professional and digital writing and changes in technology in the coming years. The program includes the following career-related and educational objectives:

- Preparing students for successful careers in technical/professional writing;
- Providing students with theoretical and practical (application of knowledge and production-related) experience in professional writing;
- Encouraging students to understand the cultural and rhetorical dimensions of all communicative acts; and
- Supporting students in making significant contributions to the college, university, and community prior to their formal entry into the workforce.

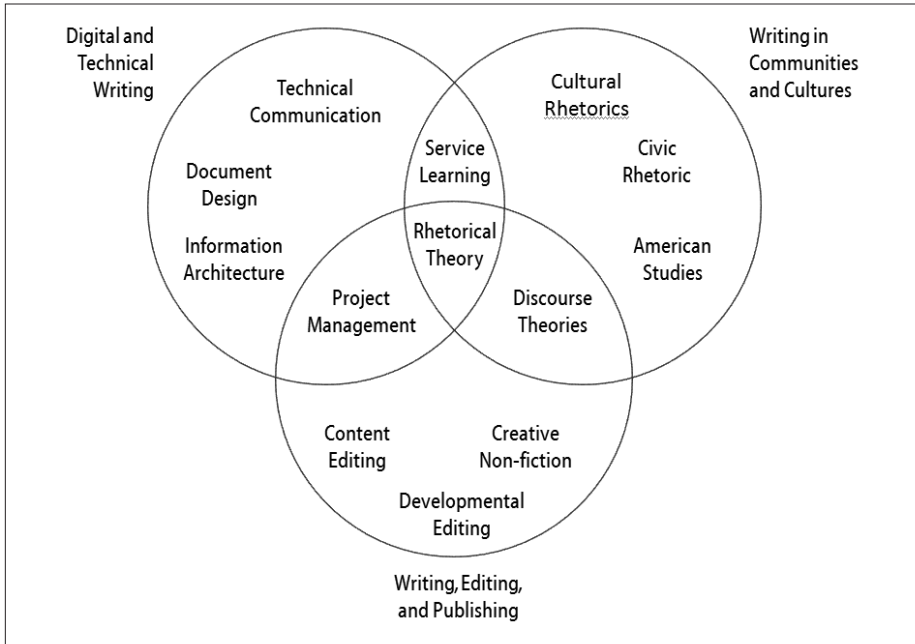
Disciplinary Articulations and Program Foci

The Professional Writing program awards bachelor's of arts degrees to students who focus on one of three emphasis areas (or "tracks") in the undergraduate major:

- Digital and Technical Writing
- Writing in Communities and Cultures
- Writing, Editing, and Publishing

Figure 1 graphically represents the core fields of study, disciplines, and major themes drawn upon within the tracks in the major. Figure 1, however, should be imagined as a movable, fluid representation. Depending on how students focus their study, what classes they take, and where they intern or volunteer, the rings can be adjusted (for instance, students interested in doing writing and public relations work for a nonprofit might be in the Writing in Communities and Cultures track, and their rings might be rotated to encompass document design).

Figure 1: Map of Professional Writing



Spanning and encompassing the disciplinary foci mapped in Figure 1 are three emphases that shape our entire curriculum: critical, rhetorical, and technological (see Table 1; see also, Selber, 2007; Selfe, 2005).

Curricular Design

Professional Writing students solve problems. The tools they use are, perhaps, not often considered problem-solving tools—words, images, texts, and interfaces—but in the hands of Professional Writing students, these become building blocks for addressing real-world problems.

Bill Hart-Davidson, Professional Writing professor

To establish a common background, all Professional Writing majors take four core courses:

- WRA 202: Introduction to Professional Writing
- WRA 210: Introduction to Web Authoring
- WRA 260: Rhetoric, Persuasion, and Culture
- WRA 360: Visual Rhetoric for Professional Writers

As previously mentioned and mapped in Figure 1, the three tracks in the undergraduate major, each have a required set of courses:

Table 1: Three Key Emphases

Critical	Rhetorical	Technological
<p>We engage students not only in the technical (how-to) aspects of writerly work but also with the critical aspects of that work.</p> <p>We promote the understanding of writing as a complex, socially situated, and political act through which humans make meaning.</p> <p>We encourage students to recognize that composing takes place within, is shaped by, and serves to shape social, educational, and political contexts.</p>	<p>We address the rhetorical complications and implications of all texts to enhance the critical dimensions of students' thinking and writing.</p> <p>We recognize that the rhetorical dimensions of the spaces in which students write complicate the rhetorical purposes for which students write.</p> <p>We emphasize a culturally situated, culturally aware approach informed by cultural rhetorics so that students navigate all texts and writing situations as "happening" through cultural lenses.</p>	<p>We encourage students to explore different computer and communication technologies so that they may choose the best technology to facilitate their writing and the rhetorical situation to which they are responding.</p> <p>We invite students to practice composing, revising, and editing (through and with text, graphics, sound, still, and moving images) using computers and communication technologies to improve their skills as writers.</p> <p>We emphasize a learning-to-learn approach, preparing students with skills that can be applied to different tools, but that transcend any one specific tool.</p>

Digital and Technical Writing

- WRA 320: Technical Writing
- WRA 410: Advanced Web Authoring or
- WRA 417: Multimedia Writing
- WRA 415: Digital Rhetoric

Writing in Communities and Cultures

- WRA 331: Writing in the Public Interest
- WRA 444: Rhetorics of American Cultures
- WRA 453: Grant and Proposal Writing

Writing, Editing, and Publishing

- WRA 370: Grammar and Style for Professional Writers
- WRA 380: Managing Publication Projects
- WRA 470: Editing and Publishing

Students also take several elective courses from the Professional Writing curriculum such as invention in writing, information and interaction design, writing nature/nature writing, writing for publication, and writing center theory and practice. All students are required to complete a senior capstone—either a senior portfolio seminar or an internship.

Distinctive Features of the Program

I did my internship with CrazyMedia, a web-development company in Spain. With the hands-on experience I had, I learned how to perfect my writing skills and really develop my web-authoring and web-design abilities. I also learned how businesses operate differently in other countries and cultures.

Andres Galarza, 2006 Professional Writing alum

One of the distinctive features of the program relates to its institutional status—that is, being housed in a free-standing writing department that had a decades-long history.

Another distinctive feature of the program is its faculty. Of the 32 tenure-system faculty in the department, 12 are core to the Professional Writing program. Fixed-term faculty and advanced graduate students sometimes also teach courses in the major. The scholarly interests of the core faculty include cultural rhetorics, new media studies, documentary writing and production, technical communication, information and interaction design, professional writing, document design, computers and writing, literary nonfiction, poetry, and more. In 2007–2008, Professional Writing faculty demonstrated the following selection of accomplishments:

- Produced a range of publications, including single-authored texts, edited collections, peer-reviewed articles, reviews, and texts published in conference proceedings (Dànielle Nicole DeVoss' co-edited *Digital Writing Research: Technologies, Methodologies, and Ethical Issues* won the 2007 *Computers and Composition* Distinguished Book Award);
- Coordinated the 2007 Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association National Conference, the Native American Literature Symposium at the Modern Language Association, and the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers & Storytellers, among others;
- Served on or chaired the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition, the Diversity Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the Michigan Humanities Council, the CCCC American Indian Caucus, the NCTE/CCCC Language Policy Committee, the CCCC Tribal College Fellowship Committee, the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric & Composition Studies, the CCCC Executive Committee, and the Intellectual Property Committee of the CCCC; and
- Served as principal or co-principal investigators on grant projects that include two MSU Outreach and Engagement Initiative grants, a Public Arts and Humanities Faculty Fellowship, a City of Lansing Human Relations and Community Service Grant, an Institute for Museum and Library Sciences Grant, and a Michigan Humanities Council Grant.

A third distinctive feature of the program is the commitment of the faculty and the curriculum to community collaboration. Several faculty members have produced scholarship on service learning or community literacies; faculty are involved in a wide range of service- and community-engagement projects. Most classes in the Professional Writing Program engage students in work that reaches out of the classroom and into various sites of literacy work and text production. Course-based projects have included writing for local nature centers and nonprofits, local community centers, university units such as the library and art museum; research for and design of the Cherokee Nation website, local public schools arts engagement projects, and writing for Michigan United Conservation Clubs, among others. Community involvement in the program is ensured by an active Community and Industry Advisory Board (CIAB).

Another distinctive feature of the program is that majors are involved in a regular complement of professional development opportunities every semester on topics including explaining professional writing (geared toward prepping students to do a handshake introduction at job fairs and informational interviews), writing resumes, preparing cover letters, securing internships, searching for jobs, and prepping for interviews. In addition, we host two student-led organizations: Writers' Bloc and the Spartan Web Authoring Team.

A fifth distinctive feature is the portfolio review component of the undergraduate major. The Professional Writing program engages students in opportunities to interact and work with other students, faculty, and business and community mentors in internships and collaborative projects. All students in the Professional Writing program are expected to prepare and maintain a working professional portfolio during their time in the program and to present a professional portfolio prior to graduation. Professional Writing courses support students in recognizing the goals of portfolios, designing their portfolios, and creating pieces to eventually add to their portfolios. Each student's professional portfolio is expected to demonstrate educational growth, development of a professional identity, ability to reflect upon and illustrate skills gained, and readiness to transition from college to the workplace and/or to graduate school.

Graduating seniors present their professional portfolios to groups of core Professional Writing faculty and members of the program's Community and Industry Advisory Board. These groups assess student portfolios based on the ways students represent how well the program has met the key program goals listed previously. (See Appendix for the portfolios assessment tool used by reviewers.)

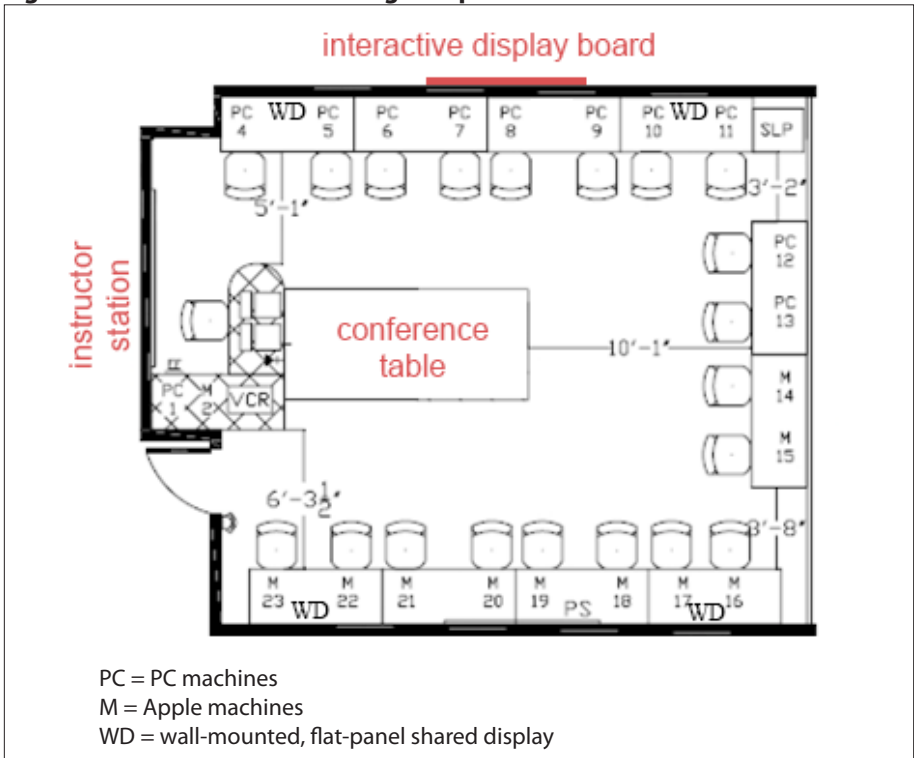
expertise that has become synonymous with the ever-expanding field of professional writing.”

Facilities

The Professional Writing Computer Classroom required two years of development, mainly because it “broke” the architecture of computer labs on the MSU campus. We felt that a flexible, studio-style space was crucial given our intellectual interests and curricular goals. The space allows for individual work, small-group work, and whole-class discussions; thus it supports lecture, lab, and workshop pedagogies. The dual-platform nature of the space supports a range of field-specific professional practices and allows students to experiment with different interfaces and operating systems (see Figure 3).

Invisible in Figure 3 is unique infrastructure of the room. Our Academic Technology Services (ATS) unit is centralized; thus, all 40 or so public computer labs on our campus are essentially the same with regard to operating system, software, bandwidth, and storage. Within the first year of our work in the Professional Writing Computer Classroom, we realized this set-

Figure 3: The Professional Writing Computer Classroom



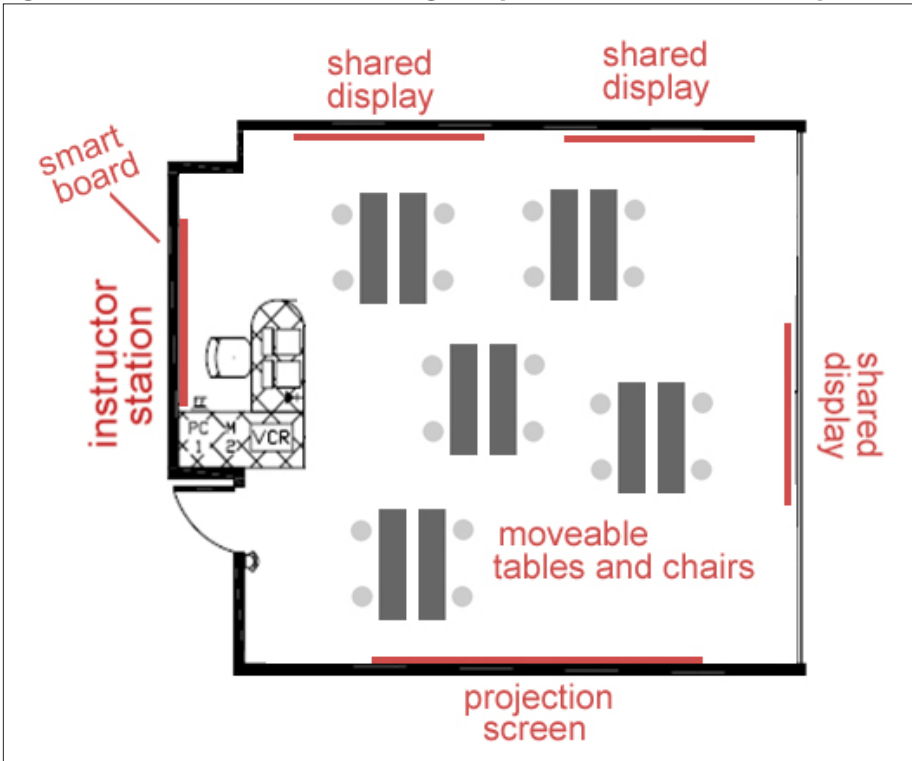
up was hindering the work we needed to do in the space (for an extended discussion (see DeVoss, Cushman, & Grabill, 2005). Some of the changes we petitioned for and implemented included locally installed software and external hard drives for additional storage.

We are in the midst of developing a second Professional Writing Computer Classroom (see Figure 4) because our primary room is at scheduling capacity. The new room will go a step further in the studio model and be equipped with flexible, ergonomic furniture (tables and chairs), with at least one interactive display (*smart board*), and with multiple and shared wall-mounted, flat-panel displays. Although the initial lab will provide space and support for high-end multimedia production courses (e.g., those using Adobe Photoshop, Premiere, Dreamweaver, and other software, we can't assume that all students will have access to), the new space will be a laptop-friendly writing studio.

Students and Graduates

Students interested in the program like to write, and they like to read. Most of them, however, are not interested in news reporting or media

Figure 4: Second Professional Writing Computer Classroom (in development)



writing (journalism) or invested in writing analyses of literature (English). Although many students are creative writers—and produce songs, poetry, short stories, and novellas—their academic and professional interests are best linked to documentation, user experience studies, usability tests, Web content development, editing and editing reports, and slideshow presentations.

When the program was first established, we attracted majors from elsewhere in the university—that is, students transferred into our program. We continue to attract majors (mainly via word-of-mouth recommendation) from across the university, but we also recruit out of high school with approximately 25 incoming first-year students declaring an interest in Professional Writing in 2007–2008. (We have considered high school-level recruitment, but the program is currently at capacity, and we’ve thus limited our publicity efforts.)

In May 2005, the program graduated its first eight students; in May 2006, the program graduated 10 students; in May 2007, the program graduated 18 students; and in May 2008, the program graduated 20 students. The Professional Writing Program currently hosts 100 undergraduate majors. An additional 20 students have declared interest in the major and are in the process of transferring into the major. Approximately 10 interdisciplinary studies students are seeking Professional Writing as an emphasis area; approximately 15 students are pursuing Professional Writing as a cognate area (somewhat like a minor) to fulfill College of Arts & Letters graduation requirements. We have developed a plan for offering a Professional Writing minor in the College of Arts & Letters, but this plan has not yet moved forward because we are currently at the limit of our current resource and budget allocation.

Professional Writing alums work in a range of writing- and communication-focused spaces, including Google, the Michigan branch of the American Cancer Society, Teach for America, software-development companies (such as TechSmith), publishing companies (including magazine publishing giants such as Conde Nast and textbook publishing companies Macmillan and Wadsworth), and Web development companies. Other graduates have pursued graduate study or law school.

Challenges

The Professional Writing program faces challenges we think are typical of newly launched majors—arguing successfully for faculty lines, staffing courses, providing high-quality academic and professional advising for majors, and ensuring strong community and industry connections. At this

point in our development, one of our most critical challenges is continuing excellence in academic advising. The Professional Writing director currently serves as academic advisor for all majors. This advising was barely possible with 40 majors; with 100 majors, it is even more difficult. We have, however, pledged not to adopt an approach typical in our college, which is to farm out students to faculty who have little or no experience in academic advising and in negotiating the complex web of university, college, and program requirements for graduation.

A second challenge is addressing a weakness we've fairly consistently observed in student portfolios over the past three years: Although students are engaged in rich cultural and rhetorical work, they don't seem to know how to highlight this work in their portfolios, which is increasingly important in the face of changing trends in professional writing. Although students offer evidence of adapting to different rhetorical situations and understanding what a rhetorical situation is, they have less understanding of how to think about this concept in a cultural context, beyond not using sexist or racist language, for example. We are currently revising one of the four core required courses of all majors, so that it more explicitly and deliberately helps to situate students to the cultural and rhetorical work they will do in the major and beyond the major in the globalized workplace.

A third challenge relates to the Writing in Communities and Cultures track in the major, the least-populated emphasis area. Many students are passionate about working with nonprofits, within advocacy organizations, and with local and state government, but we have not done as robust a job as necessary for helping students understand the connection between their interests and this academic path, or in helping students fully conceptualize and articulate the cultural situatedness of discursive acts and design choices. We are currently revising the track's curriculum and developing program recruitment efforts to attract more students into this emphasis.

Concluding Thoughts

What we hope to have mapped here, in the way we've situated and described the Professional Writing program at MSU, are the institutional and curricular geographies in which our particular writing program resides. This mapping matters for a range of reasons—reasons that often go ignored, and that, thankfully, this journal and its focus on programmatic perspectives will help to highlight—including the fact that writing programs are intellectual arguments as well as administrative structures.

Further, we would argue that the writing major, as one type of writing program design, is a critical intellectual and institutional artifact and is per-

haps a necessary one for the future viability of writing studies. The design of a writing major must find a way to wrestle with institutional histories, intellectual and disciplinary legacies, both local and global, at the same time that it projects a clear intellectual argument for who we are and where we want to be. This emphasis points to the necessity of having a vision—one that is shared by faculty, that resonates in the curriculum, that is visible across courses, and that is understood by students.

Appendix

Professional Writing Reviewer Tool for Portfolios

PORTFOLIO COMPONENTS	1 Strong Evidence	2 Some Evidence	3 No Evidence	N/A
Preparing students for successful careers in technical/professional writing.				
The portfolios demonstrate evidence of development and growth over time and/or projects. The portfolios show ample evidence of increasing skills and abilities.				
The portfolios include a biography, philosophy, or objective statement that reflects the authors' educational and/or professional purpose.				
The portfolios include well-designed, well-written, and well-presented resumes.				
The content of the portfolios complements and illustrates the resumes.				
Providing students with theoretical and practical (application of knowledge and production-related) experience in professional writing.				
The portfolios include rich and diverse sets of example documents, written exceptionally well.				

The portfolios show evidence of the authors' abilities to work productively and collaboratively with others (in pairs, in small groups, etc.).				
The design and layout of the portfolios present a unique and professional identity.				
The navigation and structure of the portfolios and their content are easily understandable and usable.				
Encouraging students to understand the cultural and rhetorical dimensions of all communicative acts.				
The portfolios show evidence of the authors' understandings of communication as a cultural and rhetorical act.				
The portfolios appropriately address both an educational and professional audience.				
The portfolios reflect the authors' ability to understand historical and cultural context and their relevance to communicative acts in professional writing.				
Supporting students in making significant contributions to the college, university, and community prior to their formal entry into the workforce.				
The portfolios demonstrate engagement with and contributions to the Professional Writing Program.				
The portfolios demonstrate engagement with and contributions to the university.				
The portfolios demonstrate engagement with and contributions to the larger community.				

OVERALL	1 Strong Evidence	2 Some Evidence	3 No Evidence	N/A
The portfolios include a selection of example materials.				
The portfolios show attention to detail in the selection of example materials, including an appropriate set of materials and attention to arrangement.				
Reflection on learning and development is obvious at points throughout the portfolios.				
The portfolios include well-written text that has been carefully edited and polished for inclusion in the portfolios.				
The portfolios do an excellent job of presenting the authors' unique skills and professional identity.				

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Author Information

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