Texas Tech University’s Online PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric

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Abstract. Texas Tech has offered its PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric via distance education since 2004. Designed with the same requirements and expectations as its brick-and-mortar modality, the program has grown larger and more selective each year—our current rejection rate for applications stands at 85% and the number of students stands at approximately 55. The doctoral program (in both its modalities) emphasize five general areas: Rhetoric, Composition, and Technology; Technical Communication; Rhetorics of Science and Healthcare; Technology, Culture, and Rhetoric; and Visual Rhetoric, New Media, and User-Centered Design. In addition, the program has the most rigorous course requirements in research methods (4 courses) in the field of writing studies. The program made several institutional innovations in order to gain approval, and these innovations continue to benefit students, among them redefining “residency” to work better with both modalities and redefining “full-time” as 3 hours per semester. One of the most innovative aspects of the online program is its requirement that students attend a 2-week seminar in Lubbock—this “Nar” provides opportunities for dissertation defenses, professional development seminars, intensive graduate courses, lectures by outside scholars, doctoral annual reviews, and ample unscheduled time for students to meet with their committees.

Keywords. technical communication, rhetoric, doctoral program, curriculum, online PhD, program design, distance education.

At Texas Tech, we have degrees in writing studies at the bachelors, masters, and doctoral levels. Although the following article sets out to describe the online doctoral program, it is important to recognize that this particular degree/modality does not exist on its own. The online PhD is part of the larger landscape of our graduate programs more generally, so before we get into the showcase specifics, let’s take a few paragraphs to establish that broader context.
About ten years ago, the writing faculty at Texas Tech University made a decision to deviate from our conventional ways of delivering graduate education. Deviate is, in some ways, too strong of a word because what we decided to do was not terribly radical with regard to curriculum or quality or mission. In other ways, perhaps the term deviate is not strong enough. We simply decided we wanted to begin offering our PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric via distance education. This decision was not undertaken as a whim—we already had experience with distance education in our master’s degree, and we saw the strategic landscape of doctoral education as ripe for such an innovation. We were receiving more queries about online courses and online certificates, students in our PhD program were asking to take classes offered online for our Master of Arts in Technical Communication (MATC) students, and the advanced students were interested in online degrees beyond our MA in technical communication, so we knew the market was probably ripe for such an offering.

Prior to embarking on this new modality, our doctoral program operated in much the same way as every other doctoral program in rhetoric, composition, or technical communication. We fielded applications in December or January, admitted students with teaching assistantships for the following fall, moved students through the curriculum at an average of three courses per semester, and the fall-spring, semester-based school year paradigm balanced graduate teaching with graduate seminars.

Upon undertaking the online modality for our doctorate, this semester paradigm underwent a radical change although the basic structure of the degree remained the same. Our online students did not seek teaching assistantships, did not proceed at the same speed or in the same direction as on-campus students, and the opportunities for professional development could not take place in conventional forums like teacher training workshops or informal meetings in professors’ offices. As detailed later, the principle innovation we designed to address these differences was a 2-week seminar/conference/workshop held each May.

**History**

Prior to the formation of separate graduate degrees, technical writing, rhetoric, and composition took place in Texas Tech’s Department of English in the form of electives and tracks for rhetoric/composition and technical writing.

Having a large engineering, agriculture, and professional student population, Texas Tech registered not only English majors into these rhetoric/
composition and technical communication courses but also other majors, including Education students.

In the late 1980's, the faculty (Carolyn Rude, Fred Kemp, Sam Dragga, Don Cunningham, Jimmie Killingsworth, Tommy Barker) began work on separate degrees, and according to the records and minutes I have found, this process was complete in 1991 or 1992; the new MATC and the PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric (TCR) admitted their first students in 1992 and 1993.

Eager to serve working technical writers who sought advance degrees via distance education, the program proposed a wholly-online modality for its MATC in 1997, which was approved and began admitting students in 1998. (See Table 1.)

The mission of the graduate programs, in general, is to blend theory, practice, and methods to produce well-rounded practitioners and scholars.

Carolyn Rude was the director of the graduate program from its inception through 2003, when she left for Virginia Tech. During her stewardship, the program grew via more students, more courses, and more faculty. When she departed, the program was big enough to split duties between a program director (overall coordination and undergraduate offerings) and a graduate director. The faculty felt Carolyn’s departure was a natural

Table 1. Overview of program history

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<tr>
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<th>MA in Technical Communication</th>
<th>PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>On-Campus</strong></td>
<td>Started: 1992</td>
<td>Started: 1992</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Grads (as of June 2013): 83</td>
<td>Grads (as of June 2013): 58</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Courses per semester: 2.5</td>
<td>Courses per semester: 2.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Time to completion: 2 years</td>
<td>Time to completion: coursework 1.9 years, quals 2.6 years, grad 4.5 years</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Distance Education</strong></td>
<td>Started: 1998</td>
<td>Started: 2003</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Grads: (as of June 2013): 47</td>
<td>Grads (as of June 2013): 29</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Courses per semester: 1.5</td>
<td>Courses per semester: 1.1 plus May Seminar</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time to completion: 3.5 years</td>
<td>Time to completion: coursework; 2.75 yrs, quals 3.3 yrs, grad 4.9 yrs</td>
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transitional moment (or creative upheaval) and we spent a full semester brainstorming about what, if anything, we should do to expand our mission or shift our direction.

The online PhD was the most attractive direction for several reasons. First, we had begun talking about it in 2001 and 2002, arguing that we had the faculty and the expertise in distance education, and that the market was ripe for such an effort.

Second, we realized we could leverage our 11 years of experience in doctoral education with our 4 years of experience in online education at the graduate level. In other words, we would not have to invent new capabilities beyond the particular intersection of doctoral education with distance education.

The underlying theoretical approach around which this program was formed was that the degree would employ the same rigor, outcomes, classes, faculty, and expectations as the conventional PhD. It would seek to produce scholar-researchers who could compete alongside our conventional PhD’s for top-tier tenure-track positions, and although we were in no position to guarantee our students would land such jobs, we were adamant that the quality of students we produced would be, on average, identical across both modalities. In other words, we wanted the marketplace to be unable to distinguish between newly minted PhDs who had completed their degree conventionally and those who had pursued theirs via distance education.

This concept guided virtually all the logistics and feel of the new program. For example, there is no group of faculty designated as “online program instructors”—rather, all graduate faculty teach courses in both modalities, serve on dissertation committees for students in both modalities, and advise students from both modalities. There is no separate curriculum for online students, no separate inventory of available classes, no separate degree requirements, no separate pool of scholarships or travel opportunities. The only differences between the two programs lie in those areas where distance or the nature of the online learner creates a real need for different policies or procedures. For example, our online students are, by and large, already employed and cannot take 3 courses per semester; as a result, as detailed later, we adjusted our guidelines as to the pace and nature of our course offerings, as well as what constitutes a “full time” student.

Although the online program made sense to the faculty, we faced a couple of serious challenges in getting traction with our proposal at its inception.
One such challenge that was almost a deal breaker during the early days of our proposal was the question of residency and of culture. I have elsewhere detailed this conflict, but the gist of the argument from the upper administration and the state coordinating board was a deep doubt about whether doctoral education could be undertaken at a distance. Wouldn’t it be better for students to have hallway chats, to go to happy hour with each other, to participate in the life of letters that characterized these administrators’ own doctoral experiences?

A brick-and-mortar experience was not only reinforced by such questions about culture driven by nostalgia or conservatism but also by rules about residency on campus during doctoral studies. At the time, the Texas Tech graduate school required doctoral students to complete 24 credit hours in a 12-month period, which was usually registered as 9 hours in the fall, 9 hours in the spring, and 3 hours in each short summer session. This arrangement was clearly not feasible for our new program, and we set out to argue that although intensive residency might make sense in certain fields, it was a throwback concept for our field, which studies and practices computer-mediated communication.

To address both the culture and the residency issue, the TCR faculty designed a 2-week seminar to address the je ne sais quoi of rubbing shoulders with faculty and chatting with classmates, as well as to provide an alternate concept of residency. The resulting May Seminar, which broke this logjam and allowed us to proceed, is detailed later.

Working our way through the various approval mechanisms in 2003, we were eventually approved at all levels in the spring of 2004. We admitted our first group of students to start coursework in fall of 2004.

The program saw its first graduates in August 2008, and we have graduated 29 PhDs from the online program as of this writing.

**Curricular Design**

The PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric is designed for students with an interest in rhetoric, writing, technical communication, and composition. The aims of study are broad knowledge of the literature on technical communication and rhetoric, specialized knowledge of some aspect of technical communication or rhetoric as reflected in the dissertation research, and ability to conduct ongoing independent research using one or more methods.

As noted above, this curriculum is identical for both on-campus and online student populations, and we feel this uniformity of quality is a key
distinguishing characteristic of the program. But beyond the way the two modalities are treated equally, the doctoral program is innovative in both its general scope and its level of customization for each doctoral student. Generally, the program comprises rhetoric and applied rhetorics under a large umbrella that includes technical communication, rhetorics of specific areas (like healthcare, science, new media), composition, and theoretical rhetorics. This broad approach provides numerous opportunities for synergies between otherwise compartmentalized areas of study. (The opposite approach, something akin to a boutique curriculum, might be more narrowly and deeply focused on one of those areas.) Within this synergistic framework is the expectation that students will customize their specific interests via a large and varied faculty and ample electives offered every semester.

The PhD requires at least 60 hours of graduate courses beyond the bachelor’s degree and at least 12 hours of English 8000 (Doctor’s Dissertation). Further, students must demonstrate proficiency in research methodology. There is room for 15 hours as a minor, but in practice, we haven’t seen many students take this route, perhaps because the university still has to make minor courses available via distance education in sufficient numbers, or perhaps because our TCR course offerings are fairly diverse.

**Required Courses**

**Pedagogy (one or both)**
- 5060 History and Theory of College Composition
- 5366 Teaching Technical and Professional Writing

**Research**
- 5363 Research Methods in Technical Communication and Rhetoric

**Rhetoric (one or both)**
- 5364 History of Rhetoric
- 5361 Introduction to Rhetorical Theory

**Foundations**
- 5371 Foundations of Technical Communication

The remainder of the credits fall into an approximate 2:1 ratio of theory/methods : application courses.
Research Methods
Research methods courses enhance a student’s ability to complete and to evaluate research. In addition to ENGL 5363, Research Methods in Technical Communication and Rhetoric, students are required to complete nine graduate hours in research methods courses with a grade of B or better in at least two of the three. ENGL 5362, 5379, 5388, and ENGL 5389 may count toward the TCR specialization as well as toward methods.

Foci
As we began advertising the online PhD program and fielding queries from the market, we realized that the name of the degree, Technical Communication and Rhetoric, obscured the more varied areas of inquiry we offered. After some investigation, we deemed it was not feasible to rename the degree; however, we did decide that we could articulate these academic areas of emphasis. After a year of refining the categories and their descriptions, we arrived at the following five areas of specialty at the doctoral and master’s levels in our admissions, scholarship, coursework, and initiatives:

Rhetoric, Composition, and Technology. The art, history, and theory of persuasion, argumentation, and expression and how such activities are applied and taught.

Technical Communication. Theory, history, practice, teaching, and management of workplace communication, including the genres of reports, manuals, and proposals, and the skills of document design, style, and editing in a variety of media.

Rhetorics of Science and Healthcare. Consideration of discourse and communication within scientific, technical, and medical fields.

Technology, Culture, and Rhetoric. History, theory, and analysis of tools, techniques, and various cultural factors (feminism, ethics, intercultural analysis) in the production and reception of discourse.

Visual Rhetoric, New Media, and User-Centered Design. Theories, applications, and research in visual communication from a rhetorical and user-centered perspective, including subjects such as Document design, Web design, Multimedia design, Usability studies, Media studies, Instructional design, and Interaction design.

Although it is not a subject area, we also advertise that we emphasize research methods in our PhD program. In fact, we have the most rigorous
course requirements in research methods (4 courses) in the field of writing studies, according to internal market research we have conducted. Each of these areas is covered in more detail in the following section.

**Rhetoric, Composition, and Technology**

Courses in this focal area seek to augment traditional approaches to composition pedagogy with rhetorical theory, methods of assessment and research appropriate for composition studies, and theories of technology that place the study of composition firmly in a technological milieu, including multi-modality and technologically-mediated forms of communication.

**Courses**

- **5060 History and Theory of Composition.** Seminar in history and contemporary theories of composition and rhetoric studies. Required for all new teaching assistants and graduate part-time instructors
- **5361 Introduction to Rhetorical Theory.** Classical and modern theories of rhetorical invention
- **5362 Rhetorical Analysis of Text.** Classical and modern theories of rhetorical analysis
- **5364 History of Rhetoric.** Survey of history and theories of rhetoric with an emphasis on applications to written communication
- **5368 Studies in Written Argumentation.** History and theories of written argumentation
- **5369 Discourse and Technology.** Study of the effects of computer networks and digitally mediated knowledge management on theoretical, practical, and pedagogical notions of discourse and discourse communities

**Selected Dissertation and Publication Titles**

- **Rhetorical Organization in Contemporary Chinese and English Argumentation: A Contrastive and Comparative Study**
- **Understanding Users Undergoing Change: An Examination of an Innovative Hybrid First-Year Composition Course**
- **New Process, New Product: Redistributing Labor in a First-Year Writing Program**
Argument in Hypertext: Writing Strategies and the Problem of Order in a Non-Sequential World

Writing Dialogically: Bold Lessons from Electronic Text

Reading Arguments: How Sophisticated Readers Read Graduate Admissions Arguments

Arguing about Arguments: How Committees Argue and Make Decisions about Graduate Admissions

Technical Communication

Courses in this focal area seek to combine both “on-the-page” approaches to textual production (genres, tools, and techniques) and “off-the-page” studies like pedagogy, project management, and user-experience design.

Courses

5366 Teaching Technical and Professional Communication. Theory and teaching of technical and professional writing with special attention to developing course objectives, syllabi, and teaching techniques.

5371 Foundations of Technical Communication. Theory and practice of technical communication

5372 Technical Reports. Theory and practice of reports and proposals

5373 Technical Manuals. Theory and practice of manual development and design

5374 Technical Editing. Substantive editing and design of technical documents

5375 Document Design. Theory and practice of creating comprehensible, usable, and persuasive texts

5376 Online Publishing. Design and testing of online documents to support instruction and information retrieval

5383 Grants and Proposals. Theoretical issues and practical experience dealing with the genre and process of writing grants and proposals
Texas Tech University’s Online PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric

**5387 Publication Management.** Strategies of managing processes and knowledge that support publication

**5388 Usability Testing and Research.** Methods of planning, conducting, and analyzing usability tests

*Selected Dissertation and Publication Titles*

**Knowledge-Building Spaces in Technical Communication:** Navigating a Tertiary Orality

**Teaching Intercultural Communication in a Service Technical Writing Course:** Alternative Ways of Presenting Intercultural Issues in Technical Writing Textbooks and in Real Classrooms

**Open-Source Software Development and User-Centered Design:** A Study of Open-Source Practices and Participants

**The Role of Rhetorical Invention for Visuals:** A Study of Technical Communicators in the Workplace

**Technical Communication in the Public Sector:** Convergence Analysis of Historical Discourse and the Reports of the Immigration Commission, 1911

**Web-based Training Evaluation in the Workplace:** Practices, Instructional Architectures, and Skills

**Ethos and Exigence:** The White Paper in Technical Communication

**Decision-Making as a Rhetorical Act:** The Role of Choice in the Design and Delivery of an Online Education Program

**Editing from the Author’s Viewpoint:** Results of an International Survey

**Editing from the Author’s Viewpoint:** Cross-cultural Results

**Rhetorics of Science and Healthcare**

Courses in this focal area seek to merge theories of rhetoric (historical, theoretical, and methodological) with intense sites of modern disciplinary activity. Some of these sites are more established, such as rhetorics of science, although others are emergent, such as rhetorics of economics, healthcare, and accessibilities/disabilities.
Courses

5384 Rhetoric of Scientific Literature. The foundational, canonical course for the emphasis. It deals with rhetorical critique of classic science arguments, such as Darwin’s Origin of the Species. It also introduces ideas developed further in the specialty courses 5386 Discourse and Social Issues. This course is taught with a focus on social issues that are also of a scientific nature (e.g., environmental, risk communication, classification, and so on)

5369 Discourse and Technology. This course is taught with a focus on documentation of technology as used in the medical profession or in other applications of science

5382 Theory and Research in the Written Discourses of Health and Medicine. This course includes current theory and research in the written discourses of health and medicine, focusing on the roles of technical and professional

Selected Dissertation and Publication Titles

The making of knowledge in science: Case studies of paleontology illustration

Metaphor and Knowledge: The Challenges of Writing Science

Optimism and Pessimism on the High Plains: A Tale of Archaeological Reports

“You Just Don’t See Enough Normal”: Critical Perspectives on Infant-Feeding Discourse and Practice

Understanding Women’s Concerns in the International Setting Through the Lens of Science and Technology

The Medical Normalization of Abnormal Bodies: Intersex and Resistance

Artificial Intelligence as a Discursive Practice: The Case of Embodied Software Agent Systems
Technology, Culture, and Rhetoric

Courses in this focal area investigate synergies between and among rhetorical theory, technology theory, and cultural theory, including productive intersections such as feminist rhetorics, alternative rhetorics, and intercultural rhetorics.

Courses

5365 Alternative Rhetorics. Consideration of non-western, feminist rhetorical texts

5369 Discourse and Technology. Study of the effects of computer networks and digitally mediated knowledge management on theoretical, practical, and pedagogical notions of discourse and discourse communities

5377 Theoretical Issues. Special topics in areas such as cultures, feminisms, and genres

5385 Ethics and Technical Communication. Definitions, philosophies, and applicability of ethics to technical communication problems and solutions.

5386 Discourse and Social Issues. Study of uses of written discourse in problem solving on social issues involving science or technology.

Selected Dissertation and Publication Titles

Linking Contextual Factors with Rhetorical Patterns in Chinese and American Business Letters: Moving toward Convergence?

Culture and Context: Invention and Style in Historical and Contemporary Regulations

Translation Issues in Chinese Folk Medical Texts

Technical communication learning on the United States-Mexico border: Factors affecting cross-cultural competence in globalized settings

A Comparison of Greek and Chinese Rhetoric and Their Influence on Later Rhetoric
Visual Rhetorics, New Media, and User-Centered Design

Courses in this focal area investigate new sites of rhetorical and technical communication activity within rhetorical frameworks and epistemologies. Like most of the courses in our curriculum, these courses are heavily invested in praxis, where theories inform application, and practice grounds theory.

Courses

5365 New Media Rhetoric. Introduction to theoretical and practical complexities and practicalities of working with new media and graphics

5369 Discourse and Technology. Study of the effects of computer networks and digitally mediated knowledge management on theoretical, practical, and pedagogical notions of discourse and discourse communities

5375 Document Design. Theory and practice of creating comprehensible, usable, and persuasive texts

5376 Online Publishing. Design and testing of online documents to support instruction and information retrieval

5377 Visual Rhetoric. Analysis and theory of the persuasive, discursive, and argumentative nature of the visual components of documents

Selected Dissertation and Publication Titles

Web Development: A Visual Spatial Approach

Writing Software Documentation: A Task-Oriented Approach

Cruel Pies: The Inhumanity of Technical Illustrations

Hiding Humanity: Verbal and Visual Ethics in Accident Reports
Research Methods Required

The Technical Communication and Rhetoric Program emphasizes knowledge-making through rigorous research methods course requirements. We believe in having the tools and the experience needed to understand a problem, formulate a research question, and study the issue thoroughly, thus creating new knowledge in our field. Our 4-course methods requirement is, by our reckoning, the largest number of course requirements in our discipline, and is far above what is expected of students in most other PhD programs in the field. Further, our program offers these research methods courses as part of the TCR curriculum, thus ensuring that students will have the opportunity to apply the methods they learn to problems encountered in our field. Finally, the range of methods courses is diverse, somewhat mirroring the several focus areas (detailed later).

All doctoral students take 5363 Introduction to Research Methods in Technical Communication and Rhetoric and are also required to take 3 more methods courses, either from our own program’s considerable inventory of courses or from outside our department.

Courses

5363 Research Methods in Technical Communication and Rhetoric

5362 Rhetorical Analysis of Text
Strategically, the program competes for high-quality graduate students who are bound by geography. One of the key goals the TCR faculty established in the proposal process was that we wanted this online PhD program to have the same degree of rigor and quality as our on-campus version. To signal this commitment to quality, we committed to offer the same range of courses, use the same graduate faculty, expect the same admissions requirements, and apply the same programmatic reporting from the new program as with the existing program. And with the exception of policies that are difficult or impossible to implement online, we have instituted and maintained these equivalencies for 10 years.

Logistically, the online PhD program uses existing resources, existing courses, and existing technical infrastructure, thus keeping the costs of operation under control. We discovered in the beginning, however, that some existing structures and university rules were not adaptable to the new program, and we had to make some concerted arguments with our administration to make the online PhD possible.

First, the university operates on a 9-month budget, and the summer funds always appear at the last minute, which casts quite a bit of uncertainty about summer activities. The online PhD population takes an average of 2+ courses each summer, so it is not feasible, nor is it ethical, to cancel summer classes, even if a budget fails to materialize. For this reason, the faculty agreed that we would teach in the summers with course offerings suitable for our online students to continue to make progress. In grappling with the possibility that we might have to work for free some summer (an event that has yet to materialize), we discovered a university policy that allows summer instructors who work for free to carry the workload credit for that free course into the following school year, thereby contributing to the 9-month workload expectations. This happy discovery has allowed us to shift our summer vacations (metaphorically, of course) into any semester we require. For example, if a professor has a grant to study an archive in England in an upcoming fall semester, we can schedule her for one or two courses in the preceding summer, and carry over those courses into the fall, thereby creating a break that lasts from August until January.
A second complication, mentioned before, was that the university originally required on-campus residency of 24 hours in 12 months. In our proposal we argued that such a requirement would make programmatic innovation impossible, and we proposed an alternative concept of residency comprising 24 hours in 24 months, along with continual enrollment in the online PhD program at 4 courses per year (fall, spring, May, and summer), coupled with mandatory attendance at our May Seminar. After some arguing and justifying, the Graduate School agreed and we use this new concept of residency to this day.

In our second or third year, we became aware of a difficulty our students were having with financial aid. The university defined full-time enrollment for graduate students as 6 hours per semester, and our students were having to register for 3 “empty” hours per semester to gain financial aid, a Kafka-esque situation that found students paying what amounted to a $1600 loan origination fee every semester. Upon digging into the university bureaucracy, I discovered that “full time” was a social construct that could be redefined with a little persuasion. I wrote a proposal to the office of financial aid, the provost, and student business services, and arranged to define our online PhD students as “full time” at 3 hours per semester, based largely upon our earlier definition of residency designed for this program.

Facilities

The online PhD program has its own particular infrastructure needs. For 50 weeks a year, all program activity takes place digitally. Accordingly, the TCR program maintains a variety of servers and software packages to facilitate teaching, research, and the administration of its online degrees. We manage a number of servers within the department, including SQL servers, web servers, media servers, and software license servers. Further, we use university-centralized servers for backup web servers, virtual machine servers, and software servers.

For teaching, the online program has never blessed any particular mode of instruction or software, preferring to expose students and faculty to a wide range of options. However, the program has always offered its courses with a mix of synchronous and asynchronous components. Synchronous software we have used over the years includes our own MOO, Skype, Google Hangouts, Lych, Moodle Chat, Yahoo Instant Messenger, and GoToMeeting, among others. Asynchronous platforms have included WordPress blogs, our own Moodle learning space, Blackboard, a number of our own listserv email lists, and Google Docs, among others.
In addition, different classes make use of software packages that may be used by students in several different ways: license servers to student virtual machines, academic licenses downloadable during the term by students, and deeply-discounted software (primarily Microsoft and Adobe products) available from the university.

Although we try to be frugal with course fees and technology expenditures, we also recognize that technically-mediated projects require us to purchase licenses, or, from time to time, to partner with our students with course fees to buy discounted software.

Most of the tuition and fees generated by online program accrue to the TCR program, and those funds are used, in turn, to maintain this technical infrastructure.

For 2 weeks a year, online PhD students come to campus for the May Seminar. Because the campus is virtually empty, our program has the “run of the campus,” and makes use of the university’s recording studio, digital media lab, 3-D lab, among other common facilities. In addition, students take classes during those 2 weeks in two of our specialized labs.

ENGL 5388 Usability Research takes place daily in our Usability Research Lab (URL), a two-room facility with eye tracking hardware and software, Morae’s suite of usability tools, and ample digital recording equipment to facilitate course learning.

ENGL 5377 New Media Rhetorics takes place in our MULTiple Literacies Lab (MULL), a facility that contains a variety of hardware, software, and training tools for using digital media, video, audio, podcasting, streaming, and instructional design.

ENGL 5375 Document Design meets in our most advanced computer classroom, making use of digital editing tools and Adobe INDESIGN and the rest of the Adobe CREATIVE SUITE.

Faculty

The following faculty teach in the program. One of the biggest changes in the faculty is that the ranking was assistant-heavy in the early 2000’s, and as you can see from this list, our ranks are much better distributed post-2010. The faculty contributes to the doctoral program in its diverse range of research expertise. Further, faculty culture is one of sharing, collaboration, experimentation, and team teaching.

- Ken Baake, Associate Professor, rhetorics of science and economics, metaphor and rhetoric theory
- Craig Baehr, Associate Professor, web design, report genre research, professional writing and organizational communication
Texas Tech University’s Online PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric

- Kelli Cargile Cook, Associate Professor, technical communication pedagogy, online writing pedagogy, web-based training, and technical communication program development and assessment

- Joyce Locke Carter, Associate Professor, theories of technology and argumentation, user experience design, rhetorics and economics

- Sam Dragga, Professor, ethics in technical communication, technical editing, intercultural communication, visual communication, and first-year composition.

- Angela Eaton, Associate Professor, editing, grant- and proposal-writing, empirical research, grammar and style research, technical communication pedagogy

- Miles Kimball, Professor, visual rhetorics, history of technical communication, information graphics, intersections of technical communication and culture, web portfolios, archival research

- Amy Koerber, Professor, rhetorics of healthcare and medicine, rhetorics of science and technology, women’s studies, internet studies

- Susan Lang, Professor, computer-based instruction in composition and literature, intellectual property issues, hypertext, textual theory, data-mining methods

- Kristen Moore, Assistant Professor, technical communication in the public sphere, especially public policy and participation, critical and rhetorical methodologies, and the rhetorics of race and gender in technical communication and STEM fields

- Rich Rice, Associate Professor, contemporary composition and rhetoric, new media and professional writing, TA training, portfolio assessment, distance education and service learning

- Rebecca Rickly, Professor, gender and communication, online and oral discourse analysis, methods and methodology, theories of rhetoric(s), and literacy issues

- Abigail Selzer King, Assistant Professor, organizing and rhetoric (especially connected to identities, genders, nationalism, and meanings of work), interpretive and qualitative methods, including rhetorical criticism, argumentation analysis, microhistory, and computer-assistive qualitative data analysis
Texas Tech University's Online PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric

- Brian Still, Associate Professor, medical discourse, theories of technology, online communities, internet activism, medical discourse, techno-pedagogy, and open source issues
- Sean Zdenek, Associate Professor, disability and web accessibility studies, the rhetoric of closed captioning, deaf studies, sound studies, methods of rhetorical criticism, and animated software interfaces

Other faculty who have taught in the online PhD program and who have moved on to other jobs include Kirk St. Amant, Thomas Barker, and Amanda Booher. Fred Kemp retired in 2012.

**Students and Graduates**

We currently admit approximately 13% of applicants to the program, a fact we attribute to our quality (egotistically) and to the lack of adequate competition (realistically). Our retention rate is quite high, around 90%, and reasons for attrition include health and family problems, burn-out, and getting overwhelmed by work duties in their other lives. In other words, these reasons for dropping out mirror what we see in our on-campus population.

The online PhD student is typically a little bit older than the more conventional on-campus PhD student, with an average age in the late 30’s. Further, most of our students (90%) already come from the academy, where they hold positions as adjunct instructors, administrative staff, advisors, and occasionally tenure-track positions. The remaining 10% of our students work in industry as consultants, technical writers, freelance writers, grantwriters, or usability researchers.

Women outnumber men 2:1. Of the 55 currently registered students, 15 (27%) are men. Of the 29 students we have graduated, 11 (38%) are men.

Many of our students who enter the program tell us that after graduation, they expect to keep their current job, earning a raise, promotion, and new opportunities in their institution. Indeed, some of their employers pay for their doctorate with the expectation the newly-minted PhD will continue to work for them for a certain period of time. Of the 29 students we have graduated to date, 21 have remained in the same institution. The other 8 used the PhD to change jobs, earning tenure-track jobs at universities.

All students are active in the field, from conference participation, publications, leadership, and research.
Texas Tech University's Online PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric

May Seminar

The most distinctive feature of this program is the intensive 2-week May Seminar, a cross between a bootcamp and an academic conference. As mentioned above, this face-to-face requirement, also called the ‘Nar, the May Workshop, and the MayMester, was crafted partly in response to questions about residency and culture. The May Seminar also creates an opportunity to recharge students’ batteries in the event that they languish after coursework or after quals—no matter how crazy a student’s other 50 weeks are, they can count on a culture of inquiry and support when they come to campus. Finally, the TCR program uses the Seminar as a way of exposing online students to all the knowledge that on-campus students learn in between classes.

A Culture of Knowledge Exchange

One of the fundamental assumptions about distance education in general, and about this PhD program specifically, is that context is hard to come by. One should take this warning with a grain of salt, of course, as the nature of class experiences, collaborations, and advising varies with the people involved and the technology used. However, it is certainly arguable that doctoral education entails much more than just coursework, with its learning outcomes often neatly bounded by the 15-week syllabus. How does a program -- a group of faculty -- share the values of its field with its students? How can we fill the gaps between course learning outcomes with a culture of the scholar/researcher?

The May seminar is one of our program’s main ways of addressing these questions. At its core, the ‘Nar builds and maintains a culture of inquiry, research, and scholarship, even as it achieves the more pragmatic goals of orientation, intensive coursework that helps students make faster progress, and encouragement to students to continue making progress toward graduation.

In many ways, it is a simple approach, as we believe in putting people together in space and time not only to learn the ropes about the program and the academy but also to bounce ideas off each other.

Specifically, we cram the following things into the 2-week event:

• Students present their research to the faculty and to each other in a variety of formats (posters, 20-minute conference presentations, longer lectures, “speed-dating” called Rapid Rhetoric, and research network forums). These presentations give students who may not have been able to attend scholarly conferences...
the chance to test their ideas in a safe environment and to refine their methods and theory in a supportive, if perhaps a bit competitive, space. The audience of faculty and fellow students also offers formative criticism designed to address performance, poster design, and engagement.

- The faculty presents its research at every lunch session so that students can get to know what we are working on. In fact, our guide is not to present something already in print, but to share what we are working on, even if the project is not finished. By working without a net, so to speak, we hope to model what we think scholarly inquiry looks like and to hopefully show our students what sharing formative ideas looks like.

- Faculty, students, and invited guests spend lunches together in unstructured space designed to facilitate brainstorming and the sharing of ideas.

- The students live together for the ‘Nar, with the expectation that so-called “off” time can be good for support and for brainstorming, not to mention providing students with the chance to build their own culture within and among their cohorts. A good example of such an emergent tradition is that it was decided sometime in the past that the third time cohorts came to the ‘Nar, they would host a barbeque for their classmates, and this tradition has continued since 2007.

- When possible, we schedule dissertation defenses so that students can get a glimpse of what is expected of them eventually. Because most of our students do not work at a doctoral degree-granting institution, the defenses scheduled at the ‘Nar are the only times they get a chance to attend.

**Annual Review**

Online students have their annual reviews during the ‘Nar, and this meeting with their committee follows the same format and purpose as it does for the on-campus students. In the first year, students are assigned committees, and in subsequent years students meet with their dissertation committees.

During this hour-long ritual, every facet of the student’s progress and character is up for discussion. Committees discuss their assessment of student strengths and weaknesses, incompletes, independent studies,
internships, committee and/or title changes, transfer courses and their equivalencies, planning for quals, and dissertation prospectus, among other items. The committee and the student also discuss accomplishments from the previous year and forecasts of publications and conferences in the upcoming year.

First-time students also begin a discussion about their eventual dissertation committee. Professors may suggest names, but our culture/procedure is to respect the student’s own decision about the makeup of the dissertation committee.

Committees and students document their action items, letting the Graduate Director know about changes to the student’s expected grad date, changes to the committee, recommended courses, progress plans for incompletes, and committee recommendations about continued support (if the student has a teaching assistantship).

**Professional Development**

The faculty takes all the professional development workshops and meeting that we normally hold during the long semester for our on-campus students and distills these experiences into workshops for our online students. Table 2 (from May 2013) includes typical types of workshops we hold during the ‘Nar.

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<tr>
<th>Session 1a: Topics for 1st-year students: preparing for first-year annual reviews; understanding the role of your 1st-year committee &amp; developing a degree plan</th>
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<td>Joyce Carter</td>
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<th>Session 1b: Research grant writing</th>
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<td>Angela Eaton</td>
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<th>Session 2: Topics for 1st-year &amp; 2nd-year students: selecting a chair &amp; committee; identifying possible dissertation topics; setting publishing/presenting goals, etc.</th>
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<td>Sean Zdenek</td>
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<th>Session 3: Publishing your research</th>
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<td>Craig Baehr</td>
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<th>Session 4: Topics for 2nd-year &amp; 3rd-year students: writing a dissertation proposal, preparing reading lists, preparing for Quals, preparing IRB documents, etc.</th>
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<td>Becky Rickly &amp; Grad Students</td>
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<th>Session 5: Topics for post-Quals students: writing the dissertation &amp; preparing for the dissertation defense—intent to graduate forms, graduate deadlines, etc.</th>
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<td>Susan Lang &amp; Grad Students</td>
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<th>Session 6: Topics for the job search: creating/updating CV &amp; job search materials—cover letters, teaching philosophy statement, teaching portfolio; preparing for job interviews and the job talk</th>
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<td>Kristen Moore</td>
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<th>Session 7: Topics for writing program administration</th>
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<td>Susan Lang</td>
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Table 2. Session List from ‘Nar 2013
**Outside Visitors**

Because we do not know if our students come from doctoral granting institutions, we want to expose them to ideas beyond their faculty; therefore, we invite scholars they had likely read in their graduate courses to visit for a day or two, give a lunch talk, and participate in ‘Nar activities. We invite two scholars each year, one for each week, and aim for a balance of theory and practice, rhetoric/composition and technical communication, men and women. We encourage our visitors to give lunch talks over their next project, not one of their finished projects, for reasons previously mentioned.

- 2005 Laura Gurak & Saul Carliner
- 2006 George Hayhoe & the Computers and Writing Conference
- 2007 Johndan Johnson-Eilola & Lee Brasseur
- 2008 Mary Sue MacNealey & Robert Johnson
- 2009 Karen Schriver & James Porter/Heidi McKee
- 2010 Jeanne Fahnstock & Michael Hughes
- 2011 Steven Katz & Howard Reingold
- 2012 Carolyn Rude & Charles Bazerman
- 2013 Gerald Savage & Cheryl Ball

**Cohorts**

Part of the culture of the ‘Nar is that every group of new students creates its own identity, complete with a name and sometimes other identity materials. For example, the Quadrophonics unveiled their identity as a jewel cased CD featuring a faux musical act, and contained a CD with their bios, full color “band” photographs taken around campus, liner notes, and a track-by-track description of “songs” that illustrated their experience in the ‘Nar. The cohorts help provide a long-term safety net and context for success in the program, and students report that they rely on their cohorts for support, especially after they are finished with coursework.

- 2005 Frodotypicals
- 2006 M2
- 2007 Third Degreez
- 2008 Quadrophonics
- 2009 Fifth Iteration (2009)
- 2010 Something with a Six
Challenges
No program, especially an innovative one, comes without challenges.

Managing Growth
One of the TCR faculty’s greatest challenges has been dealing with growth. The net effect of creating the online PhD was to double the size of our graduate program.

In our 2003 proposal, we had figured conservatively on admitting 2-4 students per year, but even with rejection rates as high as 87%, we have still realized annual admissions of 8-11 students. Fortunately, the program began to hit equilibrium, with the number of graduations more or less matching the admissions beginning in 2008-9 and continuing to this day.

Dealing with larger number of graduate courses offered online has not been terribly difficult, as it is a simple matter of good planning. What is quite a bit more difficult is choosing the right blend of courses so that online PhD students, as well as online MA students, have a good choice of courses each semester that will help them make progress towards degree completion.

Far more complicated than graduate teaching is dealing with the bulk of PhD work that comes after coursework: the qualifying exam, the development of the dissertation project, and serving on dissertation committees. It is not unusual for members of our faculty to find themselves chairing three or four dissertations and serving on seven or eight other committees. What we have realized is that it is best for each faculty member to say yes or no to prospective dissertation committees based not on total work, but on anticipated yearly flow—so that even if I am serving as chair for three students, each of those students is at a different point in research. With one, I am developing qualifying exams and helping with IRB issues. With the second, I am helping with research methods and initial chapters. And with the third, I am working to get the dissertation finished and ready for a defense. Clearly, not every dissertation workload can be managed this precisely, but such a strategy is one way for faculty to visualize the post-coursework workload.

As is the case with any tenure-track job, our faculty have to manage their personal balance between teaching, service, and research; the online
PhD’s size and the diversity of its students’ dissertation topics requires a lot of time that often pulls faculty away from their own research. The size of the doctoral population, along with the various stages of dissertation work, makes the difficulty balancing teaching, service, and research especially difficult.

**Assessing a non-traditional population**

Because the population of the online PhD program is typically already employed and 75% of the students expect to keep their current job upon graduation, conventional programmatic outcomes assessment need to be tweaked, lest it appear that we have a placement rate of a paltry 25%.

For outcomes assessment purposes, we group our graduates into one of the following “paths” then link their job before undertaking the doctorate with the job they land after graduation.

- **Conventional Path** (already in the field as teacher, but now seeking tenure track job)
- **Upgrade path** (lifting ceiling at institution—taking administrative or teaching jobs and stability, but staying in that institution)
- **Switching Path** (changing careers from master’s-enabled work in fields like advertising, science, and so on)
- **Credential Path** (already a consultant, but the PhD commands higher rates and respect in the market)

**Supporting Our Online Graduate Students Financially**

Although all of our on-campus students are offered teaching assistantships, online students rarely receive such appointments, as they generally expect to keep their current jobs. Clearly, any sort of financial support helps, and we do offer online students with opportunities such as research assistantships and departmental travel funds. But the main tool we have to support graduate students is the graduate teaching assistantship, and the rules for this position require that the student work only for the university. This model works fine for conventional, on-campus students, but rarely applies to our online students. It is technically feasible, but practically difficult.

**Negotiating with the Bureaucracy**

Because the online PhD program behaves in unconventional ways (at least from the perspective of various university offices), we spend a larger share of time arguing, advocating, and educating those offices than we do for on-campus students. In other words, the administration of this program
requires considerably more bureaucratic effort than other programs do. Some of the offices that I have had to deal with in unusually intensive ways include student business services, the registrar, the class schedulers, the keeper of faculty workload calculations, facilities planning, information technology, and class evaluation, just to name a few.

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**Author information**

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