Community Building at the Programmatic Level: Arguing for the Implementation of the PARS Model in a Distance Learning Graduate Program

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Abstract: Distance learning graduate programs in technical communication can work at building community at the programmatic level as well as the course level. This work might be best done by leveraging the position of the faculty member tasked with administering the program, often called the Graduate Program Director. Through the scholarship on community of practice, this article makes a case for the GPD to take on this role and recommends as a starting point the PARS – personal, accessible, responsive, and strategic – framework developed by Borgman and McArdle (2019) for community building in distance learning courses.

Keywords: Community, distance education, graduate program

Technical Communication has long had programs delivered via distance-learning at all levels. The field has talked about curriculum development and program assessment quite a bit. But as a field we've not really talked as much about the notion of community, disciplinary identity, and the challenges of distance education in creating these at the programmatic level, and where I argue it can and should look different than what happens in a classroom. Given that, of all the disciplines that fall under the rhetoric and writing studies, technical communication has had some of the longest standing distance learning graduate programs, the lessons drawn from this discussion about distance learning programs, community, and the role of the graduate program directly are highly applicable to a fair number of us. In this article, I make the case, based upon concepts drawn from Community of Practice (CoP) theory, that graduate program administrators (GPDs) have significant responsibility in developing student identity much as the course work and professional opportunities play a role. This becomes especially true in programs where the primary or only course delivery happens at a distance. The central role of the GPD in developing the CoP means that the GPD's intellectual work needs to be highly deliberative and assessed regularly to

be sure it best fits community needs. In order to enact this in distance learning programs I will discuss how I used the PARS framework developed by Jesse Borgman and Casey McArdle (2019) to think about ways of increasing community and supporting student identity formation at the program level.

Current Scholarship on Community and Distance Learning

There is a fair bit of research in technical communication on creating presence and community in distance-learning courses both asynchronous and hybrid (Croft et al., 2015; Harris & Greer, 2021; Melonçon & Arduser, 2016; Moore, 2014). However, less discussion is happening at the programmatic level outside of focusing on mentoring relationships and their critical role for adult learners, as frequent participants in online learning, and for its facilitation of transformative learning (Columbaro, 2009; Tisdell et al., 2004). One notable exception is Yvonne Cleary's work that includes discussion of a face-to-face orientation workshop at the start of a program (2021). This is despite socialization's key role in professional identity development (Gabrys, 2012; Liddell et al., 2014). Graduate programs are the cornerstones to professionalization for both ALT-AC and university career focused students, with programs focused not only on learning content but also situating a student within and interaction with a discipline (Danby & Lee, 2012). So, it is vital to discuss building community at the graduate program level. Instead of leaning into talking about programs as if they are independent entities rather than groups of people, I argue it is important for a variety of reasons to talk about the central role of the GPD and locate the agency for building the foundations of programmatic community with that administrative position. Well thought through discussions and initiative development to support the CoP of our graduate students along with the essential faculty buy-in need to have what Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder call a community coordinator (2002, p. 80). In what follows, I show that some of the aspects of the community coordinator's functions as Wenger et al describe them have significant overlap with what GPDs already are responsible for. I end with a discussion of how the PARS model of Borgman and McArdle (2019) can be applicable in helping to conceptualize what a GPD might do at the programmatic level for building community. PARS, as articulated by editors Jessie Borgman and Casey McArdle (see both the 2019 *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic: Resources for Online Writing Instructors* and chapter 1 of *PARS in Charge: Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Program Leaders* (2023) has three levels of implementation for each of the four tenets, with the last being administrative. I will discuss how the PARS framework and their prompts for Writing Program Administrator consideration from the latter text have value for GPDs administrating graduate programs.

Graduate Program Directors

The administrative role of the GPD is seldom discussed across in the rhetoric and writing studies scholarship, and it is notably missing from the work of the Council of Graduate Schools. They focus on deans for much of their data gathering and

discussion. However, given the involvement of GPDs in recruitment, advising, communication, development of initiatives, event planning, and ultimately the success of graduate students, this administrative role should be seen as equal in value to student professional identity development to that which happens in classroom spaces and between mentors/chairs and students. Suzanne Ortega (2003) argues that despite this critical role, GPD roles are seen as service roles, get little or no training, and often rotate out on a 2-3 year cycle making continuity a bit difficult (Wiener & Peterson, 2019). Research on GPD roles is still sparse. Within this wide range of roles required for running a program, GPDs have a responsibility to assist students in forming the community that will help support them through their graduate careers. Finding clear descriptions of the role of administrators in charge of departmental graduate programs is not a particularly easy task, especially as there is an array of terms used such as Graduate Program Director, Directors of Graduate Studies, Program Director and Advisor. This difficulty might be in part because faculty handbooks are only available in portals limited to university and staff access. For the purposes of this article, I chose descriptions accessed on the internet at universities with graduate degrees in rhetoric and writing studies writ large to include some form of technical and professional communication that also included descriptions of the administrative position of GPD, however they may have named it. These include James Madison University (JMU) (Graduate School, 2024), North Carolina State University (NC State) (*University Catalog, Directors of Graduate Studies*, 2024), Old Dominion University (ODU) (Office of Academic Affairs, 2024), and University of South Florida (USF) (Office of Graduate Studies, 2024).

Across each of these positions, the following responsibilities were listed:

- Program Marketing and Recruitment (JMU, ODU, USF)

- Admissions to Program (JMU, NC State, ODU)

- Advising and Problem Resolution (JMU, NC State, ODU, USF[1])

- Thesis and Dissertation Coordination (JMU, ODU, USF)

- Continuance (JMU, NC State, ODU, USF)

- Certifying Students for Graduation (JMU, ODU, USF)

- Program Policies and Manual (JMU, ODU)

- Scheduling and Curriculum Review (JMU, NC State, ODU)

- Program Assessment (JMU, NC State, ODU)

- Participation in Regular Training to stay current with University/Graduate School Practices (JMU, NC State, ODU)

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[1] USF is very brief in their description, but they include general academic support, which I am assuming includes all of the categories that would be included in support of progress to degree. It is unclear to what extent they shape policy, scheduling, and assessment; although, it is a reasonable assumption they participate in those activities.

- Assigns Students to Assistantships (NC State, ODU - Does not appear in official description but is in fact how things are handled in the college of Arts and Letters)

- Fellowship Support (NC State)

- Provides Communication between Graduate School, Program, and Students (NC State; Note: this is not explicit but is implicit in JMU and ODU's descriptions.)

The significance of the role of the GPD is clear from these descriptions and aligns with Ortega's findings (2003). As I will demonstrate in the next section, the role connects to the important work of moving students from legitimate peripheral participation in CoP to full participation through the management of several of the key mechanisms for engagement. This can be complicated in the case of an online graduate program and the role of the GPD in addressing this set of issues may require different tasks.

Community of Practice Concepts

All degree programs, especially at the graduate level, operate as communities of practice as defined by Etienne Wenger (1999). They are social learning systems that are social, cultural, and historical (Wenger, 2000). Some community of practice attributes need to be both explicitly articulated and engaged with. This is work that the program, in large part through the efforts of the GPD, must do as community coordinator. Degree programs have the following community of practice attributes that include explicit and tacit ways of structuring and providing meaning to what we do (p. 47):

- There is learning through social participation.

- Work within them is action-driven and collaborative.

- People within them are multimembers across communities.

- The community has associated genres.

- The community builds learning mechanisms for itself.

- Knowledge counts as participation toward completing an enterprise of some sort.

- The community creates a form of meaning to experience and engage with the world (Wenger, 1999).

A community of practice needs interaction and reification to succeed (Wenger, 1999). The community coordinator has an important role in identifying issues important to the community, event-planning, linking members, and assessing how well goals are met, among other duties (Wenger, 2002, pp. 80-81). All of these are demonstrably true of degree programs in general. The GPD's role can often be the work of making the tacit explicit in cases where there is a lack of clarity especially as we become more and more aware of how the tacit nature of these practices are impediments to graduate student success. Also critical within the

progress of the completion of a degree program is the movement from legitimate peripheral participation to full members of a community. Engagement with communities of practice is important because stakeholders are invested in them as part of their identity, but within the definition is the notion that these are not stagnant mechanized reproductions of practice, but are negotiations by community members (Wenger, 1999, p. 97). As suggested above, the GPD is often the center for information collection and distribution about graduate program needs from students, faculty, and university administration. Additionally, they often act as the point person for planning various professionalization opportunities and are often tasked with collecting and distributing data for programmatic assessment, which is directly tied to determining how well a community is doing and the negotiations between the stakeholders necessary to make changes. In another article on this subject currently under review, I outline the intellectual work of several major tasks GPDs take on that fit into the larger scope of the community coordinator role (Wenger, 1999, p. 80; Wenger et al., 2002). Some of the most pertinent items on a longer list include identification of programmatic issues, planning and facilitating events focused on student development and professionalization, fostering development of legitimate peripheral members (students), designing for program evolution which includes planning for transition out of the position, and working with a smaller subset of faculty from the department who work as project leads and operate as disciplinary experts, critical for a degree program that houses multiple disciplines and subdisciplines.

The work of the GPD as community coordinator requires negotiation and collaboration with all, including faculty and students. Community of Practice as a heuristic has been used to consider the professional development for instructors of online courses in Aaron Bond and Barbara Lockee's *Building Virtual Communities of Practice for Distance Educators*. One of the most important concepts from that work that applies to the community building work of the GPD when encouraging faculty buy-in to the graduate program community of practice is determination of intent and identifying needs. This includes problem solving, best practice determination and innovation when the focus is specifically upon professional development for teaching (Bond & Lockee, 2014). However, when looking at program community development writ large these foci hold true as well. GPDs often have a big picture view of how well the program is running within both the department and college within which it is situated and what its needs are. As mentioned earlier, monitoring the state of the program through information gathering is key to the community coordinator functions of the GPD role.

GPDs also often work with committees who can speak for graduate faculty more broadly. Additionally, it is important to reach out to those not directly involved in these committees to ensure that buy-in to whatever community building efforts are being put in place — whether it be discussion about revisions of comprehensive exams or mentoring styles or online faculty/student discussions about thesis and dissertation committees and expectations — are met with, if not enthusiasm, at least engagement. Part of buy-in is providing faculty the ability to have a voice in the process.

Individual faculty relationships with individual students who are a part of the community of practice can have knock-on effects on the community. Encouraging investment from all parties is critical and is something a GPD must actively foster with support from other administrators.

Boundaries and Multimembership

Students often come to our graduate programs as multimembers of various CoPs. The productive nature of these spaces and tensions, the dissonance and consonance of them, is important. And while students might be working toward legitimate peripheral participation within the academic CoP of the graduate program, they are often full members of others in educational, governmental, nonprofit, and corporate spaces. Legitimate peripheral participation is "the process by which newcomers become included in a community of practice" (Wenger, 1999, p. 100). Importantly there is no such thing as "illegitimate participation" just varying degrees of moving toward integration (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 35). Part of the GPDs work is to facilitate the integration of students into the CoP through providing opportunities outside of the classroom but within the department for this integration to occur that try to consider and even draw upon student multi-membership where appropriate. The conclusion of this article will look at potential ways of doing this within the PARS model, but this integration work can be generally categorized as providing opportunities to network with students and faculty in settings that are professional/casual and providing workshop and community writing spaces where students can support each other through their development of various class projects and their capstone projects, theses, or dissertations. Students can also be encouraged to propose workshops within their specializations such as working with multilingual writers, writing in government sectors, or working with modeling and simulation teams.

The scholarship on CoP and situated learning isn't without critique, such as its failure to account for groups consisting primarily of a long standing set of members, none of whom are likely to engage in legitimate peripheral participation or its minimal address of how the introduction of those already possessing expertise may impact the understanding of who is legitimately peripheral (Fuller et al., 2005, pp. 60, 52). While the first critique is less important for a graduate program, which by its very nature will always have members working toward legitimate peripheral participation as new students, the second is more salient. For example, the fact that many graduate students come in with membership in areas of expertise outside of our technical and professional communication program's disciplinary conceptualizations of themselves is a complicating factor that we have likely encountered in course work and advising, but the GPD along with faculty mentors can assist students in seeing how to leverage this as an advantage in their research interests and contributions. Additionally, CoP, as a response to the focus on individual cognition and learning prevalent at the time of its first iterations, has left out the individualistic nature of the person and the impact that can have as the individual negotiates in and between communities. This is always a negotiation "shaped by person histories" and experiences" (Billett, 2007, pp. 55-56). Individual agency gets lost theoretically in this move away from cognitive theories of learning (Billett, 2007, pp. 55-56). GPDs are in part responsible for making sure students

within their programs are integrated into the community but also able to pursue individual interests and provide a variety of professionalization opportunities to help support this variety, whether it be master's students looking to create documentation for workplace promotion or apply for PhD programs or PhD students looking for jobs in ALT-AC spaces rather than the academy.

Faculty can also learn much from students especially those coming from or currently pursuing various career pathways in industry or other academic workplaces. despite faculty members' role as longer term members of the technical and professional academic community. Alison Fuller, Heather Hodkinson, Phil Hodkinson, and Lorna Unwin note that the prevailing model of CoP doesn't account for this neatly and tends to "treat newcomers as tabula rasa" (2005, pp. 64-66). These structures are also imbricated in relationships of power (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 36) that critics like Joanne Roberts feel are not adequately addressed along with the issue of trust, which is critical for transfer of knowledge and building mutual understanding (2006, pp. 627-628). Despite these concerns about some of the theoretical limitations, CoP is useful, and despite Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's apparent dislike for formal education as noted by Fuller et al, as a theoretical construct for analysis, community of practice works well for conceptualizing graduate programs. GPDs play a critical role in the negotiation and in maintaining and negotiating the mechanisms of this participation at the programmatic level as well as fostering trust and monitoring power situations, especially when the students don't fit an abstract set of norms that inform policy. (This happened all too often during the recent COVID pandemic.)

GPDs have important roles in setting community intent which include problem solving for everyday disciplinary issues, best practice setting — including collecting information on, sharing, and discussing best practices from a variety of sources including scholarship and in-house practices, tools and job aid creation, and innovation (Bond & Lockee, 2014, pp. 9-10). For much of these intents to succeed, though, the students within the program need to be able to see themselves as a community with the faculty joined in common cause. This is where I think that the PARS model used primarily for the development of undergraduate online writing course community provides a useful framework for programmatic thinking that GPDs can take up. In the next sections I'll talk about the exigence that led me to this conclusion and some of the ways that PARS helped me think about what to implement or to plan to address this situation in our own context, with the hope that the same framework can be useful for others looking for a way to scale things up to the programmatic level.

Lessons from a Post-Pandemic Program Survey

The basis for this argument that GPDs must take responsibility for crafting initiatives to promote community at the programmatic level is both anecdotal and statistical. When I took over as the GPD of our PhD in English Studies in mid-summer of 2022 after spending over a decade both as faculty of that program and as the coordinator of our technical (professional[2]) writing programs at the BA and MA levels, it was clear that the student sense of community was different within the program

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2   I put this in parentheses, as the program changed names a few years back.

from what it had been. It was also quite clear the needs were different from the distance learning MA program, with its focus primarily on career professionals and students looking to create a clear pathway into the corporate world that I had been overseeing. This was abundantly true even though the programs shared a significant number of courses, with student work being differently scoped at each level, along with their fundamental infrastructure. This move on my part occurred just as we were coming out of a pandemic. The noticeable negative changes the pandemic wrought on PhD program's communicative abilities that I was seeing were likely exacerbated by the temporary shuttering of our low residency requirement of two summertime weeks on campus during students' coursework phase. Where we had once had a robust community that was primarily driven by students, this had mostly fallen away. I cannot be specific about all this reasons this latter fall off may have happened as no data had been collected, but the pandemic and the myriad negative effects it had seems a likely significant contributing factor. As there were many spaces for such community work that faculty aren't privy to such as private cohort and course Facebook Groups and Google Hangouts, it is difficult to be certain.

To address the need, the program had to demonstrate what was possible. The institutional knowledge graduated along with previous students, so I developed a survey[3] (see appendix A) and distributed it to the newly revived PhD Listserv. This survey is preliminary, and lacked focus groups for providing validity, which I recognize. I opted for speed over slower deliberation as the program communications seemed to be in crisis with incorrect information in a variety of forms circulating within the informal student groups not associated with the program, and there was a need for rapid implementation of relief measures. The questions in the survey were based upon current and previous practices for communication and community building used within the program, including some course-specific communication options various faculty had been using. Literature about attrition and community was also consulted for question development (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Caruth, 2015; Devos et al., 2017; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). A follow up survey with focus groups is being planned after the students have had time to engage with some of the adjustments put in place based upon this data set, which will take about two years to fully implement. Two of the major initiatives coming out of the initial data, the video-streaming, student-led dissertation workgroups facilitated jointly by the PhD program and Writing Center begun in Fall of 2023 and associated four-day in-person/video streaming dissertation bootcamp facilitated by the GPD and Writing Center Director held in Summer 2024, have in-depth, three-year studies currently in progress, that will assist in providing understanding of how well they worked both short term over the 23-24 AY and longer term. Studies in the field have shown that post-course work initiatives of these types do have better outcomes for PhD completion (Aitchison, 2009; Aitchison & Guerin, 2014b; Cui et al., 2022; Fladd et al., 2019). A survey on the two-week residency requirement, its timing during the course of the year, and its value is being prepared by myself and the PhD advisory committee, but it was deemed unwise to do it the first year back as there was no institutional knowledge among nearly all of the parties planning and participating as to how it would function, outside of the coursework which had continued online during

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3   ODU IRB 2002350-1

pandemic, and any results regarding experience and value would likely be atypical. This type of data collection, assessment, and adjustment of the community based upon formal information gathering is precisely the type of work discussed as a critical function of the community coordinator in *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Wenger et al., 2002).

The survey discussed here focused on what I as the GPD had a certain degree control over and could improve to better meet the students' needs. At the time of the survey, January 2023, the PhD program identified 72 active students from our records. The number is as exact as I could get it, as a few students may have unofficially paused their programs without any formal indication they were doing so. Of those 72 students, 26 participated in the survey for a completion rate of 36%. Because the program knows, through multiple anecdotes and time-to-degree data that suggests a slowing of their progress, that students become a bit disconnected post-coursework because they don't have the structure that coursework and comprehensive exam preparation provides, it was important to collect information regarding where they were at in their progress through the program. For the 36 respondents, 11 were in course work, 14 were working on their prospectus or dissertation, and 1 was focusing on comprehensive exam preparation. Therefore, the split was close to being even between the major stages of the program, coursework and dissertation stages. About two-thirds of our students learn from a distance. The breakdown between those answering who were on campus (8) versus at a distance (18) was close to reflecting the overall student population in the program.

In a question designed to gauge the feelings of students on how well they believed that they were able to create community with peers, responses broke down in a more positive way than had been anticipated. A total of 58% of students felt communication was very strong with their peers on topics like course work, dissertation writing, and programmatic concerns. Another 23% felt communication was somewhat strong with their peers. Only 15% felt communication was somewhat weak with their peers. 4% (1 student) felt communication was very weak with their peers. This speaks to the resilience of students during the pandemic and how they built and maintained networks. Students reported using video streaming communication (20%), email (36%), and social media-based groups (36%), which was indicated to be Facebook in 12 answers out of the 18 who listed a preference for communication outside of class time while in coursework. One noted that texting was also heavily used, but interestingly, only that student saw group texts as a social media option. Only 8% reported using writing groups, which research shows plays a significant role in student success at the graduate level (Aitchison, 2009; Aitchison & Guerin, 2014a, 2014b; Cui et al., 2022).

However, when it comes to a sense of community with the program itself and the faculty within it, the responses were less positive. The students felt that the program could do more in communicating and promoting community. Of the options provided including SharePoint and X, students felt that emails (both the listserv and those sent directly to individuals) and Facebook were the most effective in helping them maintain a sense of community among their peers and with the program despite the fact that the program doesn't maintain a Facebook page separate

from the department's, nor do we use Facebook for significant communication for programmatic issues as a department. When asked what topics they needed more communication on, dissertations and choosing committees and advisors were listed most frequently (8 of the 18 who provided a list of topics mentioned these). There also seem to be disconnects between programmatic realities, including how far in advance we know which faculty will leave, what courses will be offered in upcoming years, and what exactly the relationship between a student and their advisor/chair should be, which speaks to a need for more transparency as this particular relationship is among the most critical for student degree completion (Caruth, 2015; Lovitts, 2001). Realistically, we cannot announce any faculty hires or departures until contracts are signed, courses change sometimes just a few weeks prior to registration because of a wide range of circumstances, and a student's relationship with their advisor/chair is very individual. Frank and transparent conversations about each of these topics is worth having, with a foregrounding of the notion that fundamentally they are learning to be independent scholars, so that some independence in delving into scholarly topics and less reliance upon faculty and specific coursework becomes important at this stage. We house literature, cultural studies, digital humanities, rhetoric and composition along with technical communication in our program with our 20 core faculty members dispersed across these disciplines. Thus, we have to actively promote the development of independence in pursuit of projects and the seeking out of professional development opportunities. That isn't to say that mentoring and professional development isn't critical. It is. But that is fundamentally different than a reliance upon faculty to guide student inquiry in a topic in which they are specialists, as no graduate program can possibly house specialists in every area that students might find themselves invested in. There are ways to support this, which I will discuss in the section about moving forward with developing programmatic-based support for students and crafting clear communication and messaging from the GPD.

The greatest interest was in formalized writing groups with accountability, faculty– or student–led, at 37%. In the section on the PARS framework, I will talk about what the initiatives this last, and in many ways key, interest expressed by the students led to. Part of the reason this last number was significant was because students mentioned in the qualitative portion of the survey how happy they were that the Summer Doctoral Institute (SDI) was returning, in part because being able to be with peers during the summer, especially face to face for the majority distance students, was seen as valuable. This in connection with the previous 37% suggested that students found time with peers working toward scholarly goals was deeply important to their sense of community, and so as GPD I needed to find ways to better facilitate that connection post-course work. Other important takeaways from the qualitative portion include a desire for more mentoring sessions combined with meet and greet events by faculty or ABD students/recent graduates. Especially desired was more faculty interaction outside of class, an important part of the events associated with the on-campus, two-week SDI, which students at the time were unaware of because of its multi-year suspension.

The website was regarded as a site for both information and community identity building, knowing what faculty and students outside of their cohort were doing was important. There was also a desire for an increased number of professionalization sessions focused on various things from CV building, ALT-AC careers, specifics on

the dissertation process, mock conference presentations. The major takeaway from the survey was that communication is not as in as much dire need of overhaul to keep students connected to each other as much as there is a need for the program to re-build some of its events infrastructure. Additionally, communication about what is in fact available must be improved and there is need for innovation in some of the areas mentioned. Re-instituting and expanding upon what had gone before is needed regarding professionalization. More work needs to be done on keeping dissertating students connected in the form of student-led gatherings, discussion/reading groups, and formalized writing groups to address professionalization, genres, and ways of knowing. An underlying theme was that the support students are getting from dissertation chairs seems to be quite variable, which means that these larger programmatic mechanisms are crucial.

PARS and the GPD

So, what can GPDs, as the administrator of their programs do to better enhance community at the programmatic level? Looking at the PARS framework, developed by Borgman and McArdle (2019) for courses, instructors, and administrators, can serve us at the graduate programmatic level, too with some careful rethinking. Their administrators are more WPAs than GPDs (specific references to WPAs along with the focus on language regarding undergraduate writing course administration and faculty professional development suggests this), but many of the principles they espouse can be useful to any administrative faculty. As it is a framework developed for distance education coursework, I think it works particularly well for distance education programs, because considering the difficulties of delivery is already inherently part of the thinking behind this framework.

PARS in this work stands for Personal, Accessible, Responsive, and Strategic and is a practical framework to better create community within distance learning courses. Personal is importantly deeply connected to personality and the concept of presence - the social nature of online interaction (Borgman & McArdle, 2019, pp. 19, 24). Programs, too, have biographies but the nature of them is a bit different. Programs, instead have mission statements but also profiles that are deeply connected to the types of students they draw and the types of professionals or teacher-scholars they produce. These can be made clear through faculty and student bios and information regarding publications, presentations, awards, and job placement. As Borgman and McArdle note, the online nature of the communication, so heavily writing dependent, means writing is first and foremost a social act (2019, p. 25). In *PARS in Charge*, they provide a list of prompts that focus on professional development for faculty and staff (2023, p. 12). GPD's do parallel work, but our professional development work is more often targeted at our graduate students who are in the process of becoming members. We also often tasked with recruitment initiatives, which require us to think about the personality of the program profile. A GPD concerned with programmatic marketing should familiarize themselves with and ideally contribute to studies done within the rhetoric and writing studies fields (such as the MA Consortium of Writing Studies Specialists' report on programs conducted in 2012 and the Doctoral Consortium of Rhetoric and Composition's current survey updates) as well as research in scholarly outlets such as the *Journal of*

Marketing for Higher Ed, *Journal of Marketing Education,* and *Journal of Education Advancement and Marketing* when initiating changes. The GPD, then must look carefully at the messaging on the university website areas they have control over especially as regards program and people (Lim et al., 2020). This messaging is often the first contact that prospective students have with the program who need to see the range of projects a program can support but also importantly is the source of information for current students, who when at a distance rely heavily upon it for information especially about faculty whom they've not had classes with, at least as my program survey results suggest. Alongside anyone directing web content development, the GPD is responsible for making certain that the messaging is consistent, appropriate student information is shared and may often need to nudge faculty into making certain their profiles are updated given that these profiles serve as an important source of information for students looking for exam and project committee members. Unless the university enforces templates, profiles may operate like the bios that Borgman and McArdle recommend. As the authors note, "[I]nstructors (or in this case the program through the efforts of faculty and the GPD) should take the lead in making … a safe space… by inviting conversation… and facilitating connections" (2019, p. 25). This means crafting spaces other than coursework where communication between online graduate students and faculty can occur, whether it be the pull medium of the website, zoom invites, workshops, or other sites like residency requirements.

Accessible is the next tenet of PARS, and it is critical not only because of Federal Mandates (along with the Americans with Disabilities Act, https://www.ada.gov/ see https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/pro-students/issues/dis-issue06.html, https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html) but is also a diversity and equity issue. Distance education programs often serve students who cannot relocate for a variety of issues include cost, work and personal obligations — students who might not be able to engage with advanced education in a traditional setting. Students are often non-traditional in many respects. This means that accessibility is not just a technological issue (although that is important) but also DEI issue that GPDs must address. In addition to technology concerns, Borgman and McArdle provide prompts for administrators considering accessibility that focus on conveying expectations, access to documentation, and aiding faculty in working with students (2023, p. 14). If thinking programmatically for a graduate program, consider providing clear access to policies, forms, and expectations regarding processes, timing of courses (especially those that are hybrid as well as synchronously video streamed, which while having clear value for helping students' disciplinary knowledge through discussion, is also a trade off in terms of access), policies requiring residency, and how certain milestones are handled such as comprehensive or candidacy examinations and defenses. This can quickly become complicated when also negotiating with the registrar's office or office of distance learning which likely controls a fair bit of scheduling, and sometimes there are no perfect, only reasonably good answers.

Responsiveness is the third tenet of PARS, and Borgman and McArdle define it as "responsive to students and the work they complete" (2019, p. 51). In *PARS in Charge,* they recommend administrators consider conveying availability to faculty and staff and creating pathways for communication over various mediated platforms

along with creating workflow systems (2023, p. 16). When considering graduate programmatic issues, responsiveness means multiple, clearly defined lines of communication between the GPD, who is the clearinghouse for programmatic issues as per the common definition, and the stakeholders. This requires creating the mechanisms for faculty/student causal professional interactions, as mentioned in the presence section previous. The survey results suggest that this is a significant factor in creating community in an online program. Borgman and McArdle also mean accessibility in terms of being reachable, through email, video meetings, or telephone calls (2019, p. 41). This necessitates flexibility on the part of faculty, but that also doesn't mean 24/7 access. As GPD, fielding questions about why a certain faculty member just doesn't answer their emails is a difficult one, and not one that is easily addressed. But it is part of the advising and problem resolution duties, and there can be a source of tense negotiation when there is a lack of buy in or understanding on the part of faculty as to what an online degree program will mean for them. However, retention of students can depend upon it. If faculty that students most wish to work with are not regularly available to them, it can be a cause for students to separate from the program, despite best efforts from administration and other faculty to fill gaps (Lovitts, 2001). Other than good faith efforts to assist students and improving faculty buy-in, I have no clear pathways forward on that issue, and it was a concern that the survey demonstrated.

The work of the graduate student when viewed from the programmatic level should be considered at the level of programmatic outcomes, and the GPD has a responsibility in maintaining the processes and the assessment of the milestones that constitute the measurement of how well the students are meeting those outcomes. There is a significant role for the GPD in developing assessments for comprehensive exams and routing feedback for certain milestones. There is also a need for providing mechanisms to laud student accomplishments to be certain student work is valued and is seen as a model by other students. And advising is critical even as students find specific academic advisors and mentors moving forward, they need assistance in figuring out which faulty members might be a good fit, especially if hallway conversations are not a reality in their program experience.

The last tenet of PARS is strategic, a "pillar to success" for administering distance education that is "focused on the user experience of the student" (Borgman & McArdle, 2019, p. 71). The advice for administrators in *PARS in Charge* focuses on planning alongside instructors (2023, p. 17). Mapping out a process for crafting community building and the communication and programmatic events that support it based upon data from students and faculty is critical to developing a strategic approach. Borgman and McArdle's suggestion to work backward from major projects and course outcomes is just as relevant when applied to programmatic thinking, where getting students through major milestones like comprehensive examinations, prospectus defenses, the dissertation, and ultimately the various job markets are the points from which a GPD might think backward to seeing how all the pieces along the process of working on a degree for students can build to this. This means thinking about the program as more than just the coursework. Borgman and McArdle turn to experience architecture as articulated by Potts and Salvo with its focus on ecosystems of activity. I believe that GPDs, too, can benefit from gaining a "stronger understanding of strategy and [willingness] to lead

initiatives in the name of participants [our graduate students] who will use these systems and the organizations that want to engage users as contributors" (2017, p. 5). A graduate program is nothing if not an ecosystem of students, without whom it would not exist, and faculty who want to engage in crafting and promulgate disciplinary knowledge. In the PARS discussion on creating strategy, there is a focus on systematically gathering and using student feedback and finding ways to know your students while preparing faculty to work with them, which I argue is critical in absences of hallways conversation in a distance learning program. Added to this is crafting clear expectations — the function of the policies that the GPD is often in charge of both negotiating with faculty and the graduate school and distributing (pp. 73-74). The initial survey of our students indicated that, when the final tenet of PARs was applied to programmatic level thinking, communication strategies must be handled first. Other forms of critical support such as assisting dissertating students remain connected to the program is additionally highly prioritized.

Strategies must also change over time as the wide variety of needs of students, their future workplaces, and the current faculty specializations shift. Other prioritization should come from discussion with students and faculty about what the perceived needs are, and, as this is likely to change over the course of time, regular surveys and focus groups are necessary — again spearheaded and administered by the GPD.

The GPD also needs to negotiate concerns of faculty for things like program integrity and disciplinary community and identity building — we are after all certifying the next generation of practitioners, teachers, and scholars — and students' concerns with their ability to participate and their various financial situations. Regular surveys and solicitation from feedback from all parties concerned can keep the GPD clear on the concerns so that changes can be strategically planned and, in what I think is a necessary act of transparency, the GPD needs to let faculty and students know why the policies that are in place exist as they do. There should be mechanisms in place for faculty to advise upon and help craft policy such as advisory committees, and feedback from graduate faculty at large should be considered in significant policy change instances. Faculty buy-in is critical for all parts of a PARS approach, because the outcomes of much of GPD's work is very much reliant upon other graduate faculty and thus creation of good will through transparency and mechanisms for input is important. A program is its people, and without faculty both understanding and, mostly, agreeing with the policies and processes in place, administering a program can become problematic.

Moving Forward

Using the concepts from PARS, as a GPD I have worked at the programmatic level to create the following communications facilitating and community building initiatives with the assistance of the PhD advisory committee which has helped me prioritize – as there is always too much that can be done. Some initiatives have been revived after falling away because of the pivots required during the pandemic, and these have been taken up first as our history shows they work. Others are new. All of the initiatives are Responsive to data about student's needs, both from

the survey and from anecdotal evidence gathered in discussions with students and faculty, and in that sense are Strategic as they are based on data gathered fulfilling those aspects of the PARS framework; however, other initiatives fall more specifically in one or another category of PARS.

Under Personal, I am working with the PhD advisory committee on updating and expanding faculty profiles to help underscore the multidisciplinary nature of our degree program. The university just overhauled the website universally, and the new templates provide us with opportunity to highlight this strength by promoting the wide range of student projects we can support in this type of program on these pages through a News feature. The News feature will allow us to highlight alumni who work in a diverse array of spaces including outside traditional academic spheres and their profiles are critical to word-of-mouth recruitment. Others within the department are working on developing a robust department wide social media integration which the graduate programs can work within. For the basis of some of these decisions, I rely upon the excellent workshop on program profiles held at CPTSC (Almjeld et al.).

As we need to accommodate technical communication focused students alongside rhetoric and composition, literature, and digital humanities students, I've also had to find ways to integrate their specific needs. To that and, ODU also has recently received a significant grant for funding internships at all levels within the Humanities, and I am working with Monarch Humanities Internship Academy office to see what internship availability we can create for our online technical communication graduate students at the MA and PhD levels. I also have worked with alumni who have gone into industry as UX experts, designers, and health care communication specialists to hold ALT-AC workshops.

Falling under Accessible are initiatives to help students post-coursework continue to thrive and move forward, as accountability and access to peers while writing was deemed essential. The survey directly led to the implementation of the dissertation workgroups the following fall of 2023. The Dissertation Workshop Groups are student led groups that meet bi-weekly. Students are asked to choose a leader, with the expectation that this duty will rotate between them, and one of 3 meeting foci for each meeting — feedback focused, writing problem focused, or just write focused. Students are also asked to keep writing logs and reflective journals that they may then choose to share with their dissertation chairs. Additionally, a Thesis/Dissertation Boot Camp now takes place on campus and at a distance during the summer residency requirement. The one-week bootcamp for dissertating students was initially hosted by the English Graduate Student Organization, but it had fallen by the wayside in recent years and was effectively ended during the pandemic. As GPD along with my writing center director colleague, we have implemented a program-run bootcamp led by the GPD with faculty providing workshops that happen concurrent with our summer residency course requirement so that students in multiple stages of the program will be on campus or meeting over zoom for the workshops at the same time. Students on Zoom are fully integrated into the writing prompts, breakout groups, and workshops as both faculty and students in the on-campus space have normalized having student peers at a distance and have little difficulty incorporating the chat and video stream into the ongoing work.

While the workgroups are designed to help with writing prospecti and dissertations, I did end up opening them up to first year PhD students who felt additional accountability was important for writing papers for coursework especially valuable for those coming in from industry or government spaces where they might not have written academic genres for some time.

Squarely in the Responsive category was the desire to have better messaging and discussion about the program and career questions. Students in the survey indicated they wanted student-lead discussion groups about the program organized and implemented by the students (30%). This, however, relies upon student-driven initiatives, which have become problematic post-pandemic, and the primary student-driven conversation seems to be occurring over Facebook, based open anecdotal reports. Therefore, the options of a program led Slack channel or Teams group were investigated and ultimately the choice to have Canvas-based space built was agreed upon for summer/fall 2024, although, email at the time of writing remains the current primary means of programmatic communication. The Canvas space is being conceptualized by a team of 5 – the GPD and one other PhD program faculty member and 3 graduate students working in an advisory capacity to make certain the space meets their needs. The plan is to build a documentation repository, a resources list that gathers disparate materials across the university infrastructure into one space, and a student question driven discussion board within Canvas that all the student and faculty have access to.

Another initiative that falls within the Personal and Accessible categories, was the expressed a desire (at 17%) to continue with the faculty-led summer reading groups that were started on individual faculty initiative. The program is trying to formalize into something that occurs with regularity to keep students engaged in their communities over the summer while not in coursework, as this is when attrition most becomes an issue.

As the director, I also architected a communal log of presentations, publications, and awards so that any student may update their own information and increase the Personal nature of the program's profile via Google Spreadsheet entry. With student permission, I have shared information from the spreadsheet in various programmatic spaces, including our department's Facebook account. Anecdotally, its value has been mentioned in two personal emails.

Other initiative that fit into the Personal and Accessible categories of PARS include various meet and greets including a New Student/Faculty Online Meet Up, which consists of 60-minute video streamed meeting, with breakout rooms based upon stated research and teaching interests. Additionally, when it is time to plan for comprehensive exams, I hold a comprehensive exam committee meet and greet. For this meeting, students are asked to create a research profile. These profiles are made available to faculty prior to the meeting. Students also review the faculty profiles on the websites for those whom they've not had opportunity to take classes with and list faculty with whom they'd like to discuss research foci. Additionally, faculty can provide names of students they share research interests with. Breakout rooms are then created during the 90-minute meeting are created based upon these lists.

The final pillar, Strategic, will be implemented in the form of the ongoing surveys and discussions to continue to support students in the program and to innovate and shift where needed. IRB review applications have been filed for surveys and focus groups connected to the upcoming dissertation bootcamp as well as a survey of all students enrolled in the program in the spring of 2025 on communication as a follow up to the initial data. A process for making sure that all faculty provide feedback on suggested policy revisions has also been implemented to increase the buy-in critical for faculty engagement with the program and encourage a more cohesive program direction.

Conclusion and Future Directions

But despite all these ideas that fit within the PARS framework designed to promote community that are being put in place to assist our graduate students, I believe an additional and critical change both in our department, but also for the role of GPDs everywhere, is to create better transitions through mentoring and robust documentation and better professionalization at the national level. Ortega (2003) noted this as an issue nearly two decades ago. We need to create spaces within our professional organizations for the faculty holding these types of positions to talk. More research needs to be done upon this role, as well, much like had been done with the WPA to make it clear how it is distinguished from other forms of "service" like committee work especially when arguments for resources need to be made. There are a lot of threads to be woven together in this role, from advising both for curriculum and career purposes, to crafting communication channels that work for students to liaising with alums. Documentation needs to be developed and circulated. Resources—especially release time if it is not already in place along with advertising and program specific budgets—need to be argued for and acquired, and working groups at our major conferences (especially CPTSC, CCCC, and ATTW) that are directly concerned with both pedagogical and curricular issues need to be developed.

The Consortium on Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition and the Masters Degree Consortium of Writing Studies Specialists provide a good place to start this discussion. Within our universities, we can argue for a model (Ortega 2003) that lays out features including leadership summits, a listserv, and monthly focus groups. While mentoring is certainly a part of the role of the administrator of a graduate program, a great deal more goes into the role. Graduate Program Directors and administrators are instrumental in recruitment, applicant selection, advising, monitoring students' success, policy development, communication and outreach. They conduct public relations and program advertising as well as internal communication about current program events, deadlines. More effort should be put into these individuals' professional development to better support broader development of the community, particularly among students in degree programs reliant upon the communication and policies coming from the GPD.

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Appendix A

Questions for Graduate Student Survey

Please answer each of the following questions.

1.   Are you:
     - In coursework
     - Writing the prospectus or dissertation
     - Other

2.   Are you:

     - On campus full-time
     - On campus part-time
     - Distance full-time
     - Distance part-time

3.   What are your career goals upon finishing your degree?

     - Advancement in your current job
     - A new position at your current institution
     - A tenure-track job at a research university
     - A tenure-track job at a four-year institution
     - An alt-AC job outside academia
     - Other

 4.   How would you rank your connection to fellow students in the PhD program?

   1. Very strong (we communicate regularly about course work, dissertation writing, programmatic concerns)
   2. Somewhat strong (we communicate occasionally – 3 – 4 times a semester - about course work, dissertation writing, programmatic concerns)
   3. Somewhat weak (we communicate occasionally – 1–2 times a semester - about course work, dissertation writing, programmatic concerns)
   4. Very weak (we seldom communicate regularly about course work, dissertation writing, programmatic concerns)

5.   What kind of communication media did you use while in coursework to communicate with your peers outside of the class time?

     - Video Streaming
     - Email
     - Social media-based group – please list
     - Writing groups

6.   What topics do you need to see more communication regarding? List any topics that apply?

7.   What types of media are LEAST likely to grab your attention?

Push communication (media)
     - Email
     - Individual
     - Program Listserv

- Programmatic SharePoint announcements
- Other – please list

Pull communication (media)

- SharePoint

- Facebook

- Instagram

- Twitter/X

- Mastodon

- Other – please list

8. What would enhance your sense of community that the program could help provide?

- Infrastructure for formalized writing groups

- Book groups that integrate faculty and students

- Discussion group infrastructure lead by students regarding the program

- Other

  o If you are interested in a formal writing group do you prefer student-led or faculty-led?

9. What kind of communication media would you be interested in participating in as alumni? Email lists, Social media-based group – please list, Other

10. Do you have other suggestions for community building that the program might be able to facilitate?

Thank you for your participation and for helping us make the program stronger.